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ON THE MARKET SF REVU

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**IAIN M. BANKS**

INTERVIEWED



**FAR HORIZON**

JASON STODDARD



**THE TRACE OF HIM**

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST



**THE SCENT OF  
THEIR ARRIVAL**

MERCURIO D. RIVERA



**PSEUDO TOKYO**

JENNIFER LINNAEA



**JAMES WHITE**

AWARD WINNER

JENNIFER HARWOOD-  
SMITH



**ORIGINAL ART**

PAUL DRUMMOND  
DARREN WINTER



**NEWS AND  
REVIEWS**

ANSIBLE LINK  
BOOKS & MANGA  
FILMS & DVDS



**READERS' POLL**

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# FAR HORIZON



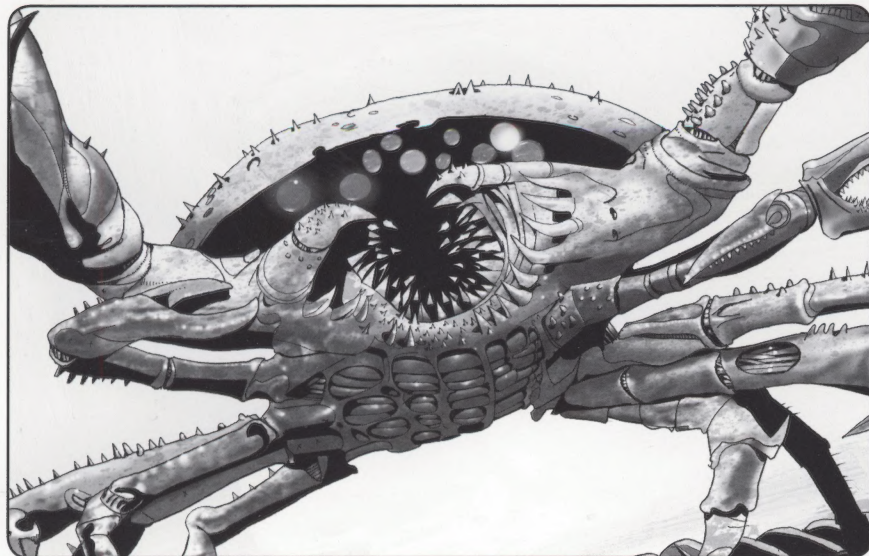


# COMING SOON...

## Crystal Nights

Greg Egan

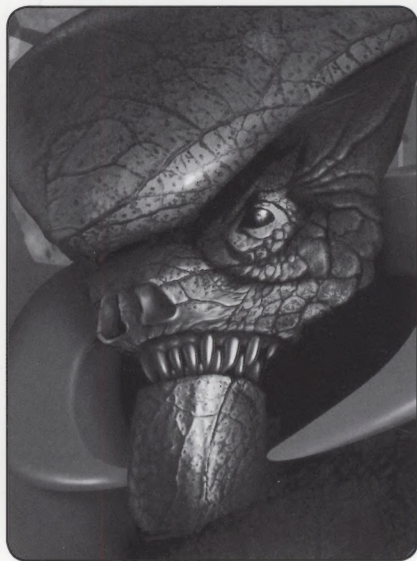
illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe



## Concession Girl

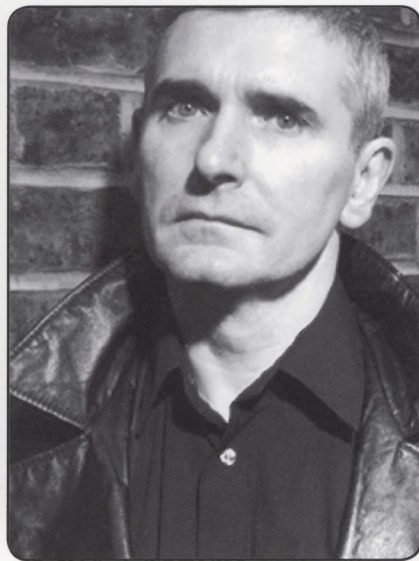
Suzanne Palmer

illustrated by Darren Winter



## Mike Carey

interviewed by Andy Hedgecock



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**Karen Fishler • Patrick Samphire • M.K. Hobson • Rudy Rucker**

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"I'm just being completely self-indulgent, as usual. If the Culture works as a setting, almost as a character in its own right throughout the stories, it's because I love writing about it"

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## OVERSEAS

Naturally we try to get subscription copies to you as quickly as possible, especially if you're overseas. However, we've noticed that the past few issues have taken much longer to arrive than normal, particularly in the USA. Sorry about that – it's the last thing we all need given the current dollar-sterling exchange rate – but please don't blame us, this slump in service is completely down to DHL Global Mail. Copies to North America, for example, are supposed to take ten days from collection to delivery on the service we've been paying for, but they have been taking... well, considerably longer than that. This isn't the first time we've had problems with DHL, which is why we moved our business to a different firm once before, but a few issues ago that firm was taken over by DHL. At the time of writing we're looking for a more reliable alternative, and we're confident that copies will begin to arrive in good time again when we've found one, very probably with this issue. Either way, please register for the forum ([ttapress.com/forum](http://ttapress.com/forum)) and let us know when your copy arrived. It's valuable feedback and helps us to maintain or even improve our level of service.

## VOTE

On the first page of this issue's insert you'll see a list of all 2007 stories and artworks you can vote for, or against, in this year's poll, along with all the instructions you need to take part. For those of you new to the poll, bear in mind that you can vote *against* anything you didn't like, according to IZ poll tradition, as these votes will then be subtracted from the story's positive count. It's quite possible that a story might have fewer positive votes than a story placed below it, because that story might have more negative votes. By the way, last year's winner for story ('Longing for Langanana'), Mercurio D. Rivera, doesn't feature in the 2007 list, but has a fantastic new story in this issue.

## COLOUR

A few people have asked if colour might be returning to these pages. The answer is yes, it might. Lately, though, things are a little more complicated than they seem, and involve the printing of some parts of *Black Static* in advance, but with a bit more time we should be able to sort something out.



### Langford confronts the Bridge of Death

**The Way We Live Now.** *Radio Clyde Breakfast Show* presenter: 'What famous detective features in the Agatha Christie novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*?' Contestant: 'Is it Harry Potter?' (*Private Eye*)

**Michael Chabon** was interviewed by Julie Phillips, biographer of James Tiptee Jr, who asked: 'Do you think you will ever really break into science fiction? Or are you doomed to keep coming back to literature?' MC: 'As for science fiction, it *is* literature, as you very well know, dear lady. The gates between the kingdoms are infinitely wide and always open!' (*Washington Post Book World*)

**J.K. Rowling** surprised a Carnegie Hall audience with the news that her Hogwarts headmaster was gay, and once in love with his rival Grindelwald. Fans tried hard not to remember the comment by her character Rita Skeeter about Dumbledore's duel of magic with that rival: 'After they've read my book, people may be forced to conclude that Grindelwald simply conjured a white handkerchief from the end of his wand and came quietly.' Later, Rowling approved legal action by Warner Bros

against prospective publishers of Steve Vander Ark's on-line *Harry Potter Lexicon* in book form. (As a cyberspace resource this was much used by JKR herself, who gave it her fan site award.) A New York judge granted a restraining order against RDR Books on 8 November, blocking publication until at least February.

### MORE NOVEL AWARDS

**World Fantasy:** Gene Wolfe, *Soldier of Sidon*.  
**International Horror Guild:** Conrad Williams, *The Unblemished*.  
**Gaylactic Spectrum** (gay/lesbian interest): Hal Duncan, *Vellum*.

**Bad Sex.** The *Literary Review*'s uncoveted honour went to the late Norman Mailer for tasty oral sex in *The Castle in the Forest*, where the relevant male organ is 'soft as a coil of excrement'. Jeanette Winterson had an honourable mention for 'silicon-lined vaginas' in an episode of steamy robot rumpy-pumpy from her novel which is most definitely not sf, *The Stone Gods*.

**Harlan Ellison** is hopping mad, again, thanks to rumours that J.J. Abrams's new *Star Trek* film (please imagine a

# EDITORIAL

# ANSIBLE LINK › DAVID LANGFORD



spoiler warning here) involves time travel arranged by the Guardian of Forever, as introduced in Ellison's 'The City on the Edge of Forever'. Ignoring the possibility that this rumour might be false, our man wrathfully and publicly demanded that Abrams and Paramount should 'pay for the privilege of mining the lode I own.'

**As Others Judge Us.** The sinister evidence against a US teenager convicted of plotting a school massacre included not only printed images of guns 'from the Internet' but what police described as a 'devil worshipping book titled *Necronomicon*.' (*Boston Globe*)

**Anne McCaffrey** knows how to survive conventions: 'She wears a protective crystal under her shirt, "to absorb the energy; of her fans' demands."' (Robin Roberts, *Anne McCaffrey: A Life With Dragons*)

**Robert Ronson**, author of a children's sf novel called *Olympic Mind Games* – set at the 2012 London Olympics – was sternly told by the Olympics 2012 committee that he wasn't allowed to use the O-word, nor such protected terms as 'London 2012' or even just '2012'. What's more, they complained, 'there is no such thing as Olympic mind games'. Ronson ignored this bluster and seems to have got away with it.

**George Takei** is an asteroid: 7307 Takei, discovered by Japanese astronomers in April 1994 and now at last officially named.

## THOG'S MASTERCLASS

**Eyeballs in the Sky.** 'The porcine little eyes widened just a bit and then settled elastically back to half-mast.' (Jeff Somers, *The Electric Church*, 2007) 'Her eyes... rolled a little in her sweet face, wildly, as if she had lost all control over their muscles. Her eyes rolled with insane movement and then went backward.' (Gardner F. Fox, *Escape Across the Cosmos*, 1964)

**Eternity Isn't What It Used To Be Dept.** 'Even Eternal Wanderings must come to an end.' (Lavie Tidhar, *Hebrew Punk*, 2007)

**Dept of Ecodomy.** "'Yes, ecology!' Merrivale made the word sound as though he wanted it to rhyme with sodomy.' (Frank Herbert, *Hellstrom's Hive*, 1972)

**Gutsy Simile Dept.** 'The thought felt like a tapeworm lodged in the gut of his mind.' (Brian Ruckley, *Winterbirth*, 2007)

## R.I.P.

**Marc Behm** (1925–2007), US author of offbeat thrillers and co-scriptwriter of *Help!* (1965), died on 12 July aged 82. His novel *The Ice Maiden* (1983) has a vampire as its central character.

**Sidney Coleman** (1937–2007), leading US theoretical physicist once active in sf fandom, died on 18 November aged 70. He co-founded the specialist press Advent: Publishers in the mid-1950s and reviewed books for *F&SF* in the 1970s.

**Alan Coren** (1938–2007), UK humorous writer, broadcaster and former *Punch* and *Listener* editor, died on 18 October aged 69. Several of his squibs played with sf/fantasy tropes: the Orwell pastiche 'Owing to Circumstances Beyond Our Control 1984 Has Been Unavoidably Detained...' (1974) made it into an Aldiss/Harrison *Year's Best SF* anthology.

**Peter Haining** (1940–2007), UK author and editor best known for some 150 anthologies of supernatural, horror, fantasy, sf and crime, died unexpectedly on 19 November. He was 67. He also published many single-author collections and scores of nonfiction titles (eg several volumes about *Doctor Who*), and ghost-edited anthologies for Peter Cushing and Alfred Hitchcock.



**Verity Lambert** (1935–2007), UK TV/film producer who debuted with the first series of *Doctor Who* (from 1963), died on 22 November; she was 71. Other genre work included *Adam Adamant Lives* (1966), *Quatermass* (1979), *Morons from Outer Space* (1985) and a 1999 return to *Doctor Who*. She received the OBE in 2002.

**Colin Kapp** (1929–2007), UK author and electronics worker fondly remembered for quirky puzzle-stories collected as *The Unorthodox Engineers* (1979), died on 3 August. His sf career began in 1958 in *New Worlds*; novels included *The Dark Mind* (1964; US *Transfinite Man*), *The Patterns of Chaos* (1972) and *The Wizard of Anharitte* (1973). Kapp was guest of honour at the 1980 UK Eastercon, where he famously delivered his speech in a spacesuit.

**Ira Levin** (1929–2007), US novelist whose best known works of horror and sf – *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and *The Boys from Brazil* (1976) – were all filmed, died on 12 November at age 78. A further sf novel is his dystopian *This Perfect Day* (1970).



**Norman Mailer** (1923–2007), celebrated US novelist who twice won the Pulitzer prize, died on 10 November; he was 84. Much of his later work has various fantastic elements, most strikingly in the ancient-Egyptian posthumous fantasy *Ancient Evenings* (1983).

**Jerzy Peterkiewicz** (1916–2007), Polish-born novelist, poet and translator who wrote the afterlife fantasy *The Quick and the Dead* (1961) and the sf *Inner Circle* (1966), died on 26 October aged 91.





# THE FACTS OF THE MATTER

Iain M. Banks interviewed by Paul Raven

**F**ebruary 2008 sees the arrival of a new novel from Iain M. Banks. Not just any Banks novel, mind you, nor even just any Banks science fiction novel. No – the new book, *Matter*, sees Banks returning his fictional focus to the much-loved Culture universe for the first time in eight years.

For those unfamiliar with Banks, a potted history may be enlightening. Banks's debut novel, *The Wasp Factory*, was published in 1984 after it had been rejected numerous times and then rescued from the slush-pile. A dark and nasty family drama with the ultimate twist in the tail, *The Wasp Factory* fiercely divided the critics, many of whom panned it as being grotesque, sensationalist and, in one case, containing "ghoulish frivolity and a good deal of preposterous sadism." Despite the negative reviews (or possibly because of them) *The Wasp Factory* was a huge success – Iain Banks had arrived.

*The Wasp Factory* was not science fiction, however. Banks's first novel of the genre, published in 1987 with the iconic 'M' inserted into his name, was *Consider Phlebas*. It was also the first novel that featured the far-future post-human anarchist techno-utopia which called itself the Culture, and is cited as being one of the books that kick-started the 'space opera renaissance'.

Including *The Wasp Factory*, Banks has published twenty-three books. *Matter* will be the twenty-fourth; the tenth of his science fiction books, and the seventh to deal with the Culture. Was it hard for him to come back to the Culture after a long hiatus?

"It's all too easy for me to write about the Culture. The problem is trying to find stuff to write about it that I think will keep people interested. I am the original Culture nerd, so I could easily descend into what you might call the train-spotter end of Culture arcana if left entirely to my own devices. Frankly, part of the point of writing non-Culture books now and again is just to prove to myself that I haven't become the literary equivalent of typecast. It's about pride, I suppose. Or self-delusion. You choose."

Few authors enjoy quite the level of popularity that Banks has accrued. A major factor in this, and one that Banks readily admits to, is that he writes the sort of books that he enjoys reading, and that (by extension) other readers will enjoy reading. Relentlessly populist but uncompromisingly well-written to the



point of being literary, Banks's novels burgeon with plot complications, vivid characters caught up in tricky situations, and twist endings aplenty. They're page-turners, to deploy a reviewer's cliché.

The appeal of the Culture novels partakes of the same qualities, partly in homage to the stories and novels Banks grew up reading. But the Culture itself has a rare and possibly unique appeal of its own, in that it is an unashamed utopian vision; Banks set out to portray a space-faring humanoid civilisation that would be the sort of place he'd like to see us end up.

"Consider Phlebas was meant to be the anti-space-opera, in a way; in that it was meant to have the full panoply of mad nonsensical over-the-top stuff, deploying the infinite special effects budget that one has in written science fiction, and it was meant to be an antidote to some of the American science fiction I had read, which was very triumphalist and quite right-wing...it always seemed to involve the most important people, perhaps not actually the nobility or kings or whatever, but people in the military or the political apparatus. So I tried to set it at the level of the grunts, if you like – most of the people who go into the tunnels at the end of *Consider Phlebas* are the grunts, they're not high up in the system.

"In some ways, the whole point of the Culture novels is the idea that there actually might be a far better society ahead. It's not all doom and gloom, there might actually be a fabulous time ahead, it's not that horrible grey future that a lot of science fiction writers end up talking about – the Culture is profoundly not a dystopia. It's a utopia...and a militant one at that, it's proud to be a utopia!"

Indeed, the Culture's citizens want for nothing – the extensive planned economy of the civilisation has created a state of post-scarcity where exploitative labour is unheard of, and the concept of personal property almost forgotten; where no one goes hungry or has to live in cramped squalor (unless they decide to do so for aesthetic reasons); where biological death is obsolete (yet largely accepted as part of life), and the very morphology of the body can be changed almost at a whim; where there is little for the average citizen to do except whatever takes their fancy, up to and including leaving the civilisation entirely should they so choose.

Not all of the Culture's citizens are biological. The civilisation is run by Minds – artificial intelligences of staggering

power who reside in (and control) the Culture's ships and habitats. The ships give themselves ridiculously bombastic or apropos names (*Awkward Customer*, *Hand Me The Gun And Ask Me Again*, and *Just Another Victim Of The Ambient Morality*, to mention just a very few), while the habitat Hubs range in behaviour from avuncular mayors to benevolent despots as needs demand.

On a par of status to the biological citizens are the drones; AIs of less power than Minds, but still able to run rings around most humanoids both intellectually and physically. Minds and drones are as likely to be major characters as the biologicals – Banks doesn't relegate them to the background.

Banks's characters are much loved by his fans – and that love sometimes expresses itself in strange ways.

"I once met a fan who'd had the little wood-cut illustrations from the paperback edition of *The Wasp Factory* tattooed on himself...and once this guy wrote to me from BFPO somewhere-or-other, I think

**"I'm just being completely self-indulgent, as usual. If the Culture works as a setting, almost as a character in its own right throughout the stories, it's because I love writing about it, and the bits that I love writing about the most are close enough to the bits that people enjoy reading about the most for a sufficiently strong fan-base to build up and make the whole enterprise worthwhile for all concerned. I'm not writing down to people when I throw in sarcastic drones, fabulous weaponry and weird aliens..."**

he was in Bosnia with the British Army, and he'd changed his name by deed poll to Cheradenine Zakalwe [the disturbed ultimate-soldier protagonist from *Use Of Weapons*]. I was kind of flattered..."

Does Banks himself have any favourites that he's particularly proud of?

"It's questions like this that make me realise I don't think about my own work at all cogently or in any properly organised way. Thinking about it now, I suppose I'd nominate Isis from *Whit* as my mainstream choice and, from the sf, Sharrow from *Against a Dark Background* – both partly because there's always a degree-of-difficulty multiplier attached to whatever merit a male author's female characters might possess. This is purely personal, of course; I'd be surprised if either character figured high in the ratings if you polled any representative sample of my readers. Shohobohaum Za from *The Player of Games* would be the one to go for a drink with, definitely."

All may be pretty peachy for the average Culture citizen, but it's a big galaxy, and

the Culture is far from the only 'in-play' civilisation, to use Banks's own term. Which means there are still plenty of opportunities for conflict and complexity to appear – opportunities limited only by Banks's wild and free-roaming imagination, which has populated the Culture books with mind-blowing megascale engineering projects, with alien races and civilisations that range from weird, funny or outlandishly grotesque (or all three at once), and with maverick characters, vast wars, crafty conspiracies, and dangerous ancient technologies.

Mundane sf, this ain't. Nor is it just a case of playing to the front-row:

"No, I'm just being completely self-indulgent, as usual. If the Culture works as a setting, almost as a character in its own right throughout the stories, it's because I love writing about it, and the bits that I love writing about the most are close enough to the bits that people enjoy reading about the most for a sufficiently strong fan-base to build up and make the whole enterprise worthwhile for all

concerned. I'm not writing down to people when I throw in sarcastic drones, fabulous weaponry and weird aliens...I mean, always assuming that's what people are looking for especially, because frankly I haven't done the market research to know for sure.

"The point is that's the fun stuff for me too. But there has to be a context, a story that makes sense and isn't just about 'Oh, wow, isn't the Culture cool.' That'd very quickly become boring for me – and, eventually, for readers too. Anyway, most of *Matter* isn't set in the Culture. Though come to think of it, the vast majority of *Consider Phlebas* wasn't set in the Culture either, and I suppose it's kind of the ur-text of the Culture novels."

Banks maintains that he doesn't analyse his own writing in any formal sense:

"I'm not that sort of writer; I know a lot of us do think about these things very seriously and very closely, but I don't. I just get a story, and my technique is to add complexity – when in doubt, add more stuff! So any meaning to the novels comes



THE NEW CULTURE NOVEL

# IAIN M. BANKS

## MATTER



**Matter** is published by Orbit, 544pp, £18.99 hb

out of what the reader takes to them... much as I'd love to think that people could only take what I'd meant to put into the books, that isn't actually what happens. Everyone reads a different novel."

That's not to say they're completely unplanned, however.

"There's a fairly detailed plan to be followed, though these days it sort of flutes out a bit towards the end so I have a bit of wriggle room to allow for unanticipated inadvertencies in the story as it works

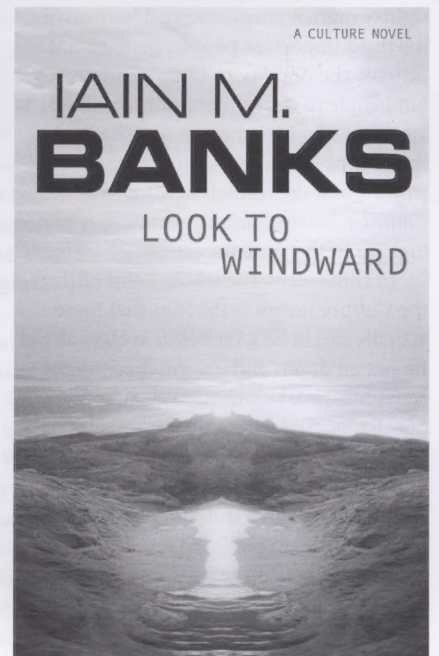
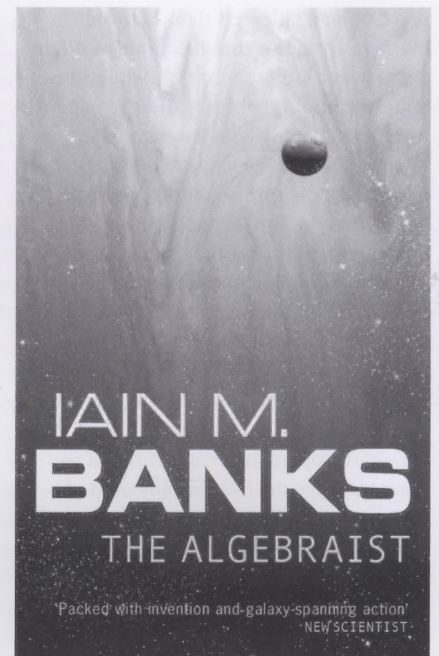
out. One should always be prepared for unanticipated inadvertencies!

"The themes I know about are there from the planning stage. I persist in cleaving to the doubtless vain hope that there are deeper themes in there I don't know anything about that somehow emerge as a natural result of the given novel's astoundingly fascinating complexity and my own extraordinary and inarguable genius. So that'll be right, then..."

But the real word always leaks into the

fictional:

"Annoyingly but inevitably. Can't help it! Some real-world stuff creeps in and some is plonked in deliberately, though that requires some care. Ultimately though, this is really a question for somebody who can be objective about my work to answer, not me. However, science fiction will remain relevant to the real world until the full effects of the Industrial Revolution have worked themselves out. So, for the foreseeable future, then."





Because of the relative stability of the Culture itself, the stories tend to take place at its fringes, featuring characters who are either involved in the parts of the Culture that interact with other civilisations, or members of those civilisations being interacted with – whether they are aware of it or not. *Matter* is no exception, and shows Banks yet again reaching gleefully into his seemingly bottomless bag of big ideas in the course of creating the story.

*Matter* is largely set on the Shell-world Sursamen, a four-dimensional hypersphere built aeons ago for purposes unclear by a (mostly) departed alien civilisation. Now it contains a number of ‘client species’ – cultures and civilisations transplanted to one of Sursamen’s levels so that they can be guided and controlled in their development to some degree.

But not by the Culture – at least not directly, in this instance. The caretaking of Sursamen is split uneasily between two alien species, the Oct and the Nariscene. The eighth level is home to the Sarl, a humanoid race who benefited in recent times from the sort of passive advice that Culture agents sometimes provide. As a result, their previously late-Medieval technology has outpaced that of their local adversaries, the Deldeyn – and as the book opens, a major attack by the Deldeyn has been repulsed.

Not without mishap, however. The king of the Sarl is murdered by his principle advisor. His eldest surviving son, the foppish Ferbin, is missing, presumed dead – which is lucky for him, because he’s next in line to the throne, and hence next in line to be removed from the succession. While the king’s youngest son, a naïve academic type, becomes the heir-in-waiting in ignorance of the Regent’s machinations, Ferbin and his laconically pragmatic man-servant flee Sursamen in search of Anaplian, the King’s other surviving child – who was long ago married off to some meddling advanced civilisation or another.

That civilisation is, of course, the Culture – and it has already caught wind of the dodgy doings on Sursamen. Anaplian temporarily leaves her work as part of Special Circumstances to tie up loose ends and pay her respects at around the same time Ferbin and Holse begin their quest to find her. Meanwhile, strange things are afoot in the land of the Deldeyn; local disputes on Sursamen turn out to have far wider connotations, and before we know it the story has panned out into a wide-screen space opera narrative of typical

Banksian scale and complexity.

Banks had a brief flirtation with short stories (one of which appeared in the pages of this very magazine two decades ago), but soon settled on the stand-alone novel as his favoured form precisely because of the wealth of ideas he produces.

“The thing is, I started out writing novels; it was always in that direction that my ambition lay. So, like an idiot, I just jumped in at the deep end...and promptly disappeared for fifteen years, but that’s not the point. I looked into the details of this once and realised that at no point in my writing career have I ever written more short stories than novels; the bottom drawer always held more wildly-overwritten novel drafts than inadequately realised short stories.

“I wrote short fiction partly because one or two ideas just seemed natural as short pieces, and partly because it seemed like a worthwhile idea to try shorter stuff – and anyway, *proper* writers wrote short stories, so therefore so should I. In the end it’s an idea-driven thing, though; where will the idea fit best? In a short story, centre-stage throughout? Or in a novel, as part of a whole, concentrated on only for a brief period?

“Almost all the ideas I have seem destined for novels from the start and even the ones that in theory could go either way tend to get subsumed in longer works as well, maybe because I’ve just got better at doing that over the years...better at seeing what you can do with any given idea to make it work in a longer framework.

“One of the things I absolutely adore about writing novels rather than trilogies or anything else is that you can just kill people off! With written sf in the single-novel context, when you open the book you have no idea who’s going to survive to the end. Especially in my books! But if you’re writing a trilogy, you’re constrained, you’re going to have to keep some people alive...the beauty, the glory of writing individual novels in science fiction is that you can just do anything.”

So, will we ever see more short fiction from Banks?

“Well, never say never – though obviously I just have, twice! I fell in love with sf largely through short fiction and I’d be horrified to see it disappear. On the other hand, I prefer to write novels, so I’m not exactly providing a good example.”

Well, we’re not going to give up hope. But in the meantime, we have a greater *Matter* to attend to. ✨

# The Silk Palace

COLIN HARVEY

BY THE AUTHOR  
OF LIGHTNING  
DAYS



“In *The Silk Palace* Colin Harvey fashions a richly textured magical kingdom that is ripe with sensuality and filled with both wonder and horror.”

– Bruce Boston, author of *The Gardener’s Tale*

[www.geocities.com/colin\\_harvey](http://www.geocities.com/colin_harvey)

[www.swimmingkangaroo.com](http://www.swimmingkangaroo.com)





**FAR**



An angel danced on the cramped stage, surrounded by smartfog in the shape of luminous clouds.

"My God," Alex Farrel said.

Adele Yucia frowned at the chimera. "There's probably no fragment of human genome in it."

Alex shook his head. He'd expected a clumsy thing, crisscrossed with surgery scars. But the angel was exquisitely made. Brilliant white wings arched above her head, trailing almost to the floor. Her body was covered in fine feathers, rising to a short crest atop her head, and her eyes were sky-blue and huge. She wore a filmy gown, wrapped over small breasts and slim hips.

"I didn't know that the 80s were back again," Adele said.

"What?"

"The song. 'Send Me An Angel'. Trite."

"I hadn't noticed," Alex said. Though he supposed he shouldn't be surprised. Paul's Bar was a throwback to the Oversight era, dug deep under the fashionable restaurants on Olympic in South Los Angeles. The walls were lined with lead foil, the floors were made of conductive tile scavenged from a defunct defense contractor, and flyeye-zappers still sputtered in the corners. Still, smartfog displays weren't cheap, so Paul must be making money with the angel.

Alex leaned closer to the stage. The angel glided closer, its wings dipping gracefully. Alex could see muscles working at its sides.

Adele hugged herself, as if cold. "We shouldn't be here."

The angel flitted away down the stage, towards other customers. Alex sighed. "I'm not worried."

"You should be."

"Winfinity probably doesn't even think this is illegal. Especially if they think they can make money on it."

"Winfinity doesn't run the country."

Alex shook his head. "Not yet."

"What about me? What happens if the nets light up with a reality bite of the CEO of Nanolife at a chimera den?"

"Maybe nothing," Alex said.

"Maybe the end of my career."

"Would it be so bad?" Alex said. "We could travel the world together, go to the Moon, buy a piece of Mars."

Adele turned to look at him, her dark eyes wide and serious. Her lips, set in a thin line, twitched downwards, just once. And it was almost as if he could hear the desperate dry whispers of her thoughts. *If he was serious, I would do it. I would follow him and see if there was any sane place in the universe.*

Alex remembered that they were supposed to be going to an opera that evening, at least before he got the message about Paul's bar with the little video clip of the angel.

He touched the back of her hand. "I'll make it up to you," he said. "I'll -"

"Unbelievable, isn't she?" a man said, crouching beside their table. The soft light of the smartfog clouds made his eyes glitter like crystal. His nose, oversized and crooked, gleamed with the sheen of oil. He smelled of cigars and hair gel, of exotic polymer fabrics and testosterone. He wore the lens of an implanted lifelogger at his temple. The lens was spray-painted black.

"Who are you?" Adele said.

"I'm Paul Borrego," the man said, looking at Alex. "The owner."

"What about the eye?" Adele said, pointing at Paul's lifelogger-lens.

Paul laughed, like a machine full of broken parts. "Remnant of life left far behind," he said. "Interesting for the ladies, sometimes."

Adele's lips pulled down into a deeper frown.

"Nothing to worry from," Paul said. "Much discretion given to visitors of stature, especially a Number and a Chief."

"A number?" Alex said.

"You're what, number six in the world? For wealth?"

Alex said nothing. But Paul was right. He imagined everyone in the bar looking at them, bitterness burning behind their eyes. There was nothing more than synthetic politeness, given only in hope of reward.

# JASON STODDARD

# HORIZON

ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL DRUMMOND



Paul gave him a greasy smile. "And with your mouth hanging open, over our angel."

"What's her story?"

Paul shrugged. "Ain't one."

"There's always a story," Alex said. Chimera-makers always wanted you to know how human DNA hid the secrets that we were once gryphons, or Neandertals, or that we were the actual and true descendants of angels, and all it took was a session with a 3D atom probe, some genetic editing software, and a bank of atom lasers to create a blastula that could prove it.

Paul shook his head. "No story."

"Who made her?"

"Don't know."

"Where'd you buy her?"

"Don't remember."

*And I bet all it takes to jog your memory is money,* Alex thought.

The angel came and danced nearby. Alex wanted to reach out and touch her, to see if the feathers were as soft as they looked.

"Does it speak?" Adele said.

Paul glanced at her, his eyes flickering like a snake-strike.

"Answer her," Alex said.

"Not much," Paul said. "A few words."

"It probably isn't any smarter than a dog," Adele said.

Alex watched her glide across the stage. *Does something this beautiful need to be brilliant?* he wondered.

Paul shot another razor look at Adele and leaned close to Alex. "She's available after the show," he whispered.

"Available?"

"Available for a private show, or something more intimate."

A sudden vision of dirty hands, stroking soft feathers on a bed of rags in a back storeroom, came to mind. Paul's craggy, streetworn face, bent over those huge sky-blue eyes. Alex's hands clenched into fists. He grabbed the back of his chair to give his hands something to do, to ensure they wouldn't fly up to Paul's throat.

*No wonder he had money to buy a smartfog display,* Alex thought.

"What's wrong?" Adele said. "What is he saying?"

"Nothing," Alex said. He stood, and beckoned Paul to follow. A lopsided grin stretched the other man's shiny face. Adele made to stand, but Alex pushed her down in the seat.

"Alex," she said.

"Wait."

He took Paul over to the bar.

"Interested, yes you are," Paul said, his smile growing even wider.

"I'd like to meet her after the show."

"Yes, discreet, very discreet. One thousand five hundred Winfinity points, please."

Alex made a small notation on his handcom, and Paul smiled. He went back to watch the rest of the show with Adele.

"She's probably not even really female," Adele said.

"Probably not."

"I don't understand what you see in those things."

Alex sighed. *I don't know either,* he wanted to say. *Maybe because they don't want anything from you.*

"I said I'd make it up to you."

"You don't have to," Stiff. Not looking at him.

Alex took Adele's hand. It trembled, just a little. "We'll go out to the opera next week."

"They're out of town next week."

"We'll go up to Santa Barbara."

Adele took her hand back, but said nothing.

When the show ended, Alex took her backstage. She followed in

silence. Paul raised an eyebrow when they both squeezed into the tiny room. It was much like he'd envisioned it, except the bed was tidy, with black satin sheets that shimmered under the soft lights.

The angel sat on the edge of the bed.

"What are you doing?" Adele said.

"Trust me," Alex said.

There was a rough chuckle from behind him. Paul. Apparently he thought if Adele was to be a witness, he could be, too.

Alex knelt in front of the angel. She looked down at him. Her mouth was parted, curved upward in a faint smile. Her brilliant sky-blue eyes seemed to sparkle with joy. She raised her arms to him, as if expecting an embrace. He wondered how many times she had done this, if she was engineered to enjoy rough acts of love.

Alex blinked back the tears that blurred his vision and pushed her arms down. Her down was incredibly soft. He saw the strange muscles working at her sides as her wings fluttered. He reached out to touch her sides, to feel the muscles clench and release, in rhythm with the wings.

"Alex!" Adele's voice, sharp, cracking.

"Shh!"

He took his arms off the angel's torso and sat back on his legs. "Do you speak?" he said.

The angel cocked her head at him, like a dog.

"Can you speak?"

"Eeeek," it said, almost a fragment of birdsong.

He tried for a while longer, but she just looked confused, and said no more.

Alex sighed. "How much?" he said.

"For what?" Paul asked. "Extended time at your home, away from here?"

"Extended. As in forever."

"Forever?"

"How much? To buy her?"

Adele gasped. "Alex, you can't –"

"Would you leave her here?" Alex asked, gesturing around the room.

"It's not even human. It may not even think –"

"Would you leave a dog here?"

Adele looked away, casting glittering tears.

Alex turned back to Paul. "How much?"

Paul smiled, a terrible broken grin. Alex imagined the calculation going on behind the man's dead eyes. *What can I get for this? Enough to set me up for life. Enough to set me for ten lifetimes –*

"How much!" Alex yelled.

"Two million!" Paul said. "Winfinit points, nothing else."

Alex made the transfer on his handcom. "Done."

Paul's face crumpled. "Should've asked more."

Alex ignored him. He held out his hand. The angel reached up. Took it. Her hand was soft and warm. For a moment, he wondered how fast her metabolism was, what she was made of, how fast she had grown, how long she would live.

*It didn't matter.*

"Do you have a name?" Alex asked.

"How about Lilith?" Adele said, behind him.

"I don't think Lilith is an angel," Alex said.

The angel just looked at him with huge, bright eyes.

"Adele –" he began.

But when he turned, Adele was gone.

.....  
Smell of fear.

Everywhere.



On her nest, on the things the hairless ones covered her with, on the fuzz that covered the floor.

Pouring off the pink ones who came and went. Who brought food. In her food.

She saw cool grass, blue water outside, but she could not walk there. She put her hand up against the barrier, but saw nothing. She pounded on the stuff-not-seen with a fist, but it only shook. Cracks near the floor brought the scent of water. She scratched at it, but could not dig through its hardness.

Prowling the big empty hard-edged places, she searched for escape. Dimly, far away, she remembered the past place, the warm room under the earth that smelled of yeast and pink ones, where there were sounds she could twist to, where the pink ones sometimes came to comfort. But those memories faded more with each day, and soon she would know nothing more than this hard-edged place full of frightened things.

"She," the constant-pink said. It had been there since she woke, bleeding fear. It had been there before, making those same noises.

"Ki," it said.

She went to sit by it. Its tiny dark eyes quivered. She reached out to it, looking for comfort. It took her hand and put it in her lap. Fear-smell surged. And something else. Something deeper, richer. Like acrid anger, but more complex. Something she could not place.

"Nah," it said.

She tried to touch it again. It put her hand down again.

"She," it said.

It had made that noise before. "She," she said.

The constant-pink showed its teeth and babbled happy noises. It made a long string of sounds that she could not follow.

"She," it said, after a while.

"She," she said.

"Ki," it said.

"Ki."

"Nah."

"Nah."

More babbling noises. Its smell changed from fear to content-full-happy. She didn't understand, because the constant-pink had not eaten, or given comfort.

"She-ki-nah," it said.

Its odor changed to that strange acidity.

"She-ki-nah," it said.

"She-ki-nah," she said.

The constant-pink stood, clapped its hands, stomped its feet on the floor. It looked big and strong. It might be able to get through the things-not-seen. It would be good to have comfort with.

She reached up to it again, and it grasped her and whirled her in a brief circle. She could smell its content-full-happiness. It made her content-full-happy. Except for the ache only comfort would replace. She grabbed its hands and tried to put them on her. But the constant-pink drew away.

"Shekinah," it said, pointing at her.

"Shekinah," she said, pointing back.

The pink thing hid its teeth and shook its head. Its smell edged slightly acrid.

"Shekinah," it said, pointing at her. It pointed at itself. "Alex."

She would play with it if it led to comfort. "Shekinah," she said, pointing at itself.

More jumping around, and rhythmic sounds. Content-full-happy smells.

The constant-pink repeated its gestures.

She pointed at him and said, "Shekinah."

Teeth-hiding and acrid smells.

She tried to get it to put its hands on her, but again it pulled away. She wailed and cried. She went to the place where she could smell the water outside and scratched at the hardness around it. She could smell the pink thing, shading down to that strange acidity.

"Shekinah," it said.

She ignored it.

Eventually, it went away.

.....  
*Alex would hate this.*

The thought was sudden and clear, as if someone had whispered in Adele's ear. She sighed and put down the stylus. Winfinity's fighter airframe contract dimmed down into the surface of her desk.

She'd almost forgotten about their last night together. But now she'd have to think about that. She'd have to wonder what he was doing with his pet. Her traitor mind would summon images of them laying together, on the cool sheets of his house high above Malibu. And she'd have to wonder, again, why they'd never found any sustained flame.

*And he would hate this*, Adele thought, picking up the stylus again. Using his technology to build jet fighters for our new masters. Even if they did profess only to be helping the government-in-collapse.

Alex had been the one to extend the range of 3D atom probes down into the realm of organic molecules. He'd been the first to create an atomic map of a cell, then reassemble the cell with atom lasers. When the cell lived, the biotech professors of UCLA cheered, and money poured in to fund his new startup company, Nanolife. He was 19 at the time.

While others were using his bio-editing techniques and creating the Three-Day Death and terrorbeasts and chimeras, Nanolife's team was working on the fundamental energy-conversion bodies of cells, mitochondria, working to make them more efficient, to make them more like the all-purpose nanomachines that Drexler had imagined.

But, by the time Nanolife succeeded in growing complex carbon composites, Oversight had slated virtually every Nanolife application for regulation. Alex was talking at UCLA about growing free housing when Oversight stepped in and shut down Nanolife.

Adele remembered it well. She'd worked there four months when she came in to black-suited, blank-eyed Oversight agents in the halls, and Alex sobbing on his desk.

*I don't understand them*, he said. *I don't know what they want.*

*Let me talk to them*, Adele said.

He looked up at her, eyes shimmering with tears. And she knew he was serious, he really didn't understand, he really just wanted to play with his toys and be left alone. She wondered if he really understood what damage his technology was capable of.

Later that day, she made the first offer on his behalf. *Regulate us. We'll work with you. We'll make sure only safe applications of the technology are used.*

When she told him, Alex cried again. She laid an arm on his shoulder. It was like touching a living statue of a god. She felt light-headed, all-powerful. She felt unclean.

*We have to do this*, she said. *It's that, or be shut down. Or disappear.*

Alex shook his head and told her, *Better to be shut down*. He told her about shining cities grown from sand and rocks, free for the having. He told her about perfect products, grown to last nearly forever.

And she listened. And nodded. And agreed, yes, this is terrible, this is unfair.

And in the end, they submitted to Oversight control. Adele



became CEO of the company, and Alex checked out. Because if you wanted to plant a seed to replace a slum, you had to make sure that seed was the right seed. One that the government said was good for you.

Like now. If you wanted to grow indestructible airframes, you had to make them for Winfinity. The new face in front of all the same old regulations.

It was no wonder Alex had walked away from it all. Leaving her to be the one who compromised.

*If I could turn back the clock, if we both walked away, could we have found that flame?* she wondered.

She sighed, coming back to the present. She spun her chair away from the desk and went to look out over sunset Los Angeles. The Nanolife tower was the tallest building on the west side. Tall enough that she could see golden ocean, sparkling in late sun. If she had a telescope, she could probably see Alex's house.

Or she could spy the modern way, with a handful of flyeyes feeding images to her dataspecs. But she didn't like wearing them, one thing she and Alex agreed on.

"Incoming call from Alex Farrell," her desk said softly.

Adele's heart tripped, once, and she whirled to face the desk. "I'll take it."

Alex's face appeared on the surface of her desk, covering the Winfinity contract. The POV shook and blurred. Greenery whizzed past in the background. She heard the sound of an engine, rough and choppy.

"Adele!" Alex said. "I can't believe we missed this. This is great! You have to come in!"

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Ecuador. Do you know what the USG did? You won't —"

"Why are you down there?"

Alex gave her an impatient sidewise look. "The space elevator!"

"Space elevator?"

"Yeah! Back when they were doing the Mars thing, it seems the USG started building a space elevator. Never finished it, but they did drop the tether about halfway before everything fell apart."

"The US government? A space elevator?" Adele shook her head, trying to put the two together. She'd never heard anything about it.

Alex gave her a big silly grin, his blue eyes flashing. His blond hair was messy and wind-blown, and dirt streaked his face. He grinned like an overgrown child.

The point of view shifted away from Alex. He was in a Humvee. Through the windshield, the jungle parted to reveal a broad expanse of concrete, crisscrossed with a hexagonal pattern of darker material.

"This is where the tether was supposed to be anchored," Alex said, offscreen. The Humvee stopped and the point of view panned around the huge flat pad. In the center was a smooth bulge that terminated in a flat surface. At the edge of the pad, low square concrete buildings huddled.

Alex turned the camera back on himself. "Bunch of expats control it now. They claim to have access to the top end, too. I think they're former Oversight. Winfinity's been trying to buy it, but they don't get along too well."

*I bet,* Adele thought. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking what a wonderful investment this would be. For us."

"You mean...leave Nanolife?" For what? Was this a business offer, or something more?

Alex shook his head. "We might need some of Nanolife's tech to make it work."

Adele nodded. Controlling the space elevator would give them easy access to orbit. They could sell access for hundreds, thousands of times what it cost in energy. They could solve one of the big problems that prevented humanity from having a space-based economy.

"Planning on changing the world again?" she said, grinning.

Alex's grin collapsed. He muttered something that was drowned in the roar of the Humvee's engine.

"What?"

"I never changed the world," Alex said, loud and bitter.

And he was right. No shining cities, free for the taking. Just magic technology, kept under careful lockdown. For Alex, Nanolife wasn't his first success. It was his first failure.

"I'm in," Adele said.

Alex's boylike grin snapped back. "Great! I'll send details. Talk to you soon!"

Alex closed the connection. On her desktop, the Winfinity contract came to the fore again. It cut through happy visions of her and Alex, alone in the jungle.

Adele stared at the thing. She picked up the stylus. Hesitated for a moment, holding the stylus over the signature area. After a few moments, she sighed. And signed it.

Because plans didn't always work out.

## 2

On the day the space elevator's tether reached the anchor, the news came in about Winfinity's latest rejuvenation failures. Big moving-ink banners on the whitewashed Quito buildings showed grotesque corpses and claimed it to be the Año de Los Muertos. Talking heads pontificated about how rejuvenation was likely to be a dangerous, complex, and expensive process.

Alex shook his head. Of course it would be. That's how they'd want it to be.

"We're going out to the pad?" Adele asked, as Alex piloted the jeep out of the city.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else."

"What if the tether breaks?"

"It won't."

"You can't say that!"

Alex sighed. They'd stripped out the old nanotube ribbon and replaced it with something from Nanolife's carbon portfolio, but

the researchers were still arguing about transient stresses and point defects.

"If it breaks, I still want to be there," he said. *Because if seventy thousand miles of nanoribbon came down, there's no guarantee that Quito will be there afterwards.*

"Idealist!"

"It's not like I'll live forever," Alex pointed at a newsboard showing pictures of the failed rejuvenations.

"You'll figure it out yourself by the time you're that old."

Alex shrugged. He could show her old Nanolife data that suggested the maximum lifespan of any human was less than three hundred years, even with some form of workable rejuvenation.

Three hundred years to make a difference. To make up for the first failure. It wasn't much time.

He pushed the jeep hard down the dirt road, hoping to make it to the site before the actual moment of contact. Some day, he knew,



that dirt road might be the largest superhighway on the planet. Quito might be transformed into a super-megalopolis larger than Shanghai. And ships from all over the world might dock in Ecuador, to cart the riches of the solar system across the face of the Earth.

*But will I live to see that?* he wondered. There were so many things he was going to miss. Even without Winfinity's failures.

"Look," Adele said, pointing up.

Ahead of them, a tiny black line bisected the sky. Almost invisible. Blink and you'd miss it. But follow it up with your eyes, into the heavens, where it disappeared. Alex imagined stars, wheeling just beyond the brilliance of the blue sky. Maybe he should buy a few thousand square miles of Martian land, and dream about the day when the planet grew green. But that was far out, impossible. It would be a hundred years before people could walk outside without squeezesuits, a thousand years before they might dare to breathe. He would never see it.

*There are so many things I'll miss.*

"I can leave you off, if you'd like," he told Adele.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Lips pressed firmly together.

"You don't need to go, just because I am."

"I want to see it, too."

Alex shook his head.

"Keep going," she said.

He did. Through the jungle to the anchorpoint, almost an acre of concrete and carbon nanotube-reinforced matrix, drilled into the heart of the mountain. They sped across the suddenly glass-smooth surface and stopped near the low rise where the ribbon would be anchored.

A team waited there, dressed in orange jumpsuits with BeyondEarth logos on them. Alex knew the drill. They were there for final lockdown. Theoretically, the complex carbon composite was stabilized by the equivalent of carbon muscles and silicon intelligence, in an ever-optimized feedback loop.

The end of the ribbon was visible, hanging motionless maybe three hundred feet above the ground. The ribbon machines were running about two feet per second now.

*Three minutes, and our space elevator is complete.*

Alex watched the end slowly fall. When it was only about fifty feet off the ground, he held his breath. He imagined seeing a ripple in the ribbon, and then the unimaginable. He wondered what the razor-edged ribbon would do to the jungle. Or to him. Would he feel it at all?

He felt Adele's hand sneak into his own. Her skin was soft and warm.

"That's it," he said, as the ribbon touched down.

The orange-suited team pounced, securing it under multiple layers of carbon composite and adhesive.

When they stood back, a thin black line connected Earth and the sky. The ribbon rose, completely straight and true, till it passed out of sight.

Alex's heart thudded, and he squeezed Adele's hand. She turned and hugged him close, turning her face up for a kiss. Alex obliged her, darting his eyes heavenward.

"We're not done yet," he said. "We still have to send the crawler down."

"Do you doubt it'll work?" Adele looked up at him, her eyes still faraway.

Alex shook his head, thinking, *I always doubt.*

"There you go," she said, and hugged him tighter.

The climber wouldn't be down for a day, so Alex took Adele back to Palos, his favorite bar. It had run a chimera show, full of clumsy surgical freaks, until Adele came down. Then the shows had ended. Alex suspected she cared for him, and that she had had something to do with the shows ending, but he didn't know how to ask, or what to do in return to thank her.

Because Adele was something like Shekinah. Embarrassingly sexual. He was almost glad that Shekinah had to remain behind in Malibu. It was easier. And he could always watch her dance on the remote monitors, even if it did seem to upset Adele.

Adele liked him, he knew. Maybe even loved him. But he didn't know what to do. He had never felt anything like love, certainly not the all-consuming force that was portrayed in the games and movies. He liked spending time with Adele, and he liked the nights they shared, but he could not imagine tying himself to her in a way that could not be undone. He had thought about it, briefly, shortly after they met, but he had never become any more certain.

Back at his apartment, under the glow of a screen that showed their BeyondEarth logo, he told Adele: "I'm moving down here."

Adele looked at him, her eyes steady and clear. As if she was expecting something.

"After all, it's not like Winfinity really wants me back in its country, after I stole this out from under them."

Adele looked away and sighed.

"I have a lot of plans for Shekinah. There are new methods for increasing cognitive capacity."

"Something of yours?"

Alex frowned. "Something I bought. I don't make anything anymore."

"You should have called her Lilith." Adele's shoulders shook, and her voice was low, husky.

"Lilith wasn't an angel."

Silence for a time. Then: "What do you see in the thing? Why do you keep it?"

*Because it's a reflection of what made it, Alex thought. Because maybe, just maybe, it can be a reflection of what we could be.*

But he said nothing.

After a time, Adele lay down next to him, softly crying. When he tried to embrace her, she elbowed him away.

The pink things came and stabbed her, drawing blood. She yelled and clawed at one of them, raking his cheek with bright red stripes. Blood spattered her face. The pink things yelled and babbled and left her alone.

In the place. The new place. Where she could go in or out. She could walk through grass. She could see the sun. A tall fence, slick and white, kept her from walking farther.

She liked the sun, until she was sick.

Belly-clenching pain. Throbbing pain in her head. She moaned and twisted, trying to evade the hurt. Tired, she went back inside and lay down on her nest.

Sweats in the night.

Strange things seen, bright, exploding.

She woke to ruined rags. They smelled of pain and fear and something else, something deep and cold and hard and wrong. She kicked them away. She could never lay on them.

The hurt in her head gnawed and pounded. She went outside and rolled in the grass, clawed at the fence. One of the pink ones watched her for a time, but it was not the constant-pink, the one that babbled at her longest.

The constant-pink came later that day. It extended a hand through



the fence. It smelled of fear and something else, that strange smell that it got when it talked to her, repeating that same sound over and over...

Suddenly, the pain in her head leapt up like a wild thing. She could feel it eating through her head. And then it was like seeing a faint path, leading backwards to days (before).

"Shekinah," she said, pointing at herself.

The constant-pink's expression changed suddenly. It showed its teeth and made a small noise. The dark scent disappeared. For the first time, it almost smelled happy and content.

"Shekinah." She pointed at herself again.

The constant-pink nodded and babbled. It smelled very happy. Then it pointed at itself and said, "Alex."

The pain in her head peaked again. She squinted and moaned. The constant-pink squeezed her hand. Water came to his eyes, and his smell darkened.

She walked away, moaning, back inside. She ate the food the pink things left and kicked the rags away. But the ground was too hard without her nest.

She slept outside, shivering, under the stars. She could see the heat of three pink-things outside, watching her.

More bright flashes and strange sights.

More sweats, tossing, turning.

In the morning, the grass had the bad smell. She ripped it out of the ground.

The constant-pink came to her late in the day. He opened the fence and came inside. He kneeled by her and made some noises, but she

didn't try to grab him for comfort. He always smelled terrible when she did that. He stroked her head, which felt nice, despite the pain.

He made her cover herself in scratchy fabric, then he took her out of her place. He put her in a strange-smelling box that roared and moved. The hurt leaped again and she saw something, dimly, like cold dark. Boxes like that. But boxes that moved different, with openings that showed only sky. She had been very frightened by that.

She was less frightened by this box. Outside, green trees and brush passed. Then white buildings, like (something before).

He took her out of the box and led her to a small building with openings of many colors. It smelled of mold and dust and old things. It was very comforting.

Inside, sunlight made the colored openings glow brightly, and she stopped to look at them. The constant-pink held her hand and waited.

She walked in a little more. An unmoving pink thing in white had its arms outstretched. Above him there were other things in white, things with wings.

(Like hers).

The unmoving things above the white pink thing were (like her.)

"Shekinah," she said, looking up at the unmoving things like her.

The constant-pink jumped and babbled, smelling happy.

"Shekinah," she said, pointing upward.

The constant-pink showed her its teeth. "Alex," it said, pointing at itself.

(Was the thing called Alex?)

"Alex," she said, pointing at him.

"Yes, yes!" it babbled.

"Yes, yes," she said.

The pain exploded in her head. It babbled other things, but all she could do was hold her head.

It babbled more, smelling worried.

"Alex." She pointed at it.

It nodded and babbled.

Then other pink things came into the place and made loud noises, smelling sharply of fear and anger. They walked towards them, arms outstretched, forcing them outside.

When BeyondEarth went public, Adele made Alex take her up the elevator to celebrate. At the geosynchronous station, dozens of spacecraft huddled outside. Some bore Winfinity flags, some wore corporate logos, some, old-fashioned, still had the symbols of the ESA or CEL on them. Spindly structures extended on either side of the geosynchronous station. Eventually, they'd grow the station to Earth's first true spaceport.

They took a room that looked down the ribbon to Earth, glinting gold in the sunlight. The Earth, cool blue, looked peaceful and far away. The room was still chill aluminum composite, unfurnished, but Adele suspected that it would soon be a luxury hotel suite, or an insanely expensive apartment. For now, though, it was theirs. There wasn't another human-transport crawler coming for three days.

*He can't run away from me,* she thought.

Alex floated over the window, looking down at the Earth. His face was slack, puffy with zero-G bloat.

"What are you thinking about?" Adele asked.

"Nothing," Alex said.

She tried to hug him, but he shrugged her off.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Adele waited. He'd talk eventually. That was the way he was.





"We could go up the tether and sling off towards Mars," Alex said. "No rockets. No fuel."

"And get there in years," Adele said.

"Or we could drop smart packages all over the world, and grow new cities."

"You're still mad."

"Of course I'm fucking mad!" Alex screamed, slamming a hand into the bulkhead. He went spinning in the air, then curled himself into a ball, eyes closed.

*He's the richest man in the world now, and all he sees is his biggest failure,* Adele thought. Winfinity had come to them, shortly after the drop. They'd worn much better suits than Oversight. They showed Alex and Adele the Earth-to-orbit missiles they controlled. They showed them the firepower in the nearby space junk.

*No stupid planting cities stuff, no stirring up trouble on Mars, and everyone's happy,* was the message.

"Never bring a billfold to a gun fight," Adele said, softly.

"What?"

"Why don't you go back into research?" Adele asked.

"I don't have any more ideas! It's the brainshot kids and bots now."

Silence for a time. Alex finally stopped his spin and clung to a handrail. "I'll miss everything," he said.

"Miss what?"

"I won't walk on Mars without a squeezesuit."

Adele just looked at him.

"I'll never go to Alpha Centauri."

Adele shook her head.

"I'll never see where we're going. Where we're *really* going. This Oversight stuff, this Winfinity stuff, they're just in the way. It's not where we're going."

"Alex –"

"Why can't we just...stay together?" Adele said. Hating the whine in her voice. She squared her shoulders. "I want to be with you. I –"

"You mean marriage, kids, all that?" Alex said. His face was blank, expressionless.

"If that's what you want. If not –"

"You don't know who I am," Alex said. "Do you know how I got to UCLA?"

Adele shook her head. That was one of the world's mysteries. Oversight was just getting started back then. There were pieces of found media scattered all over the nets from when Alex was in UCLA, but not much before.

"I volunteered for medical research," he said.

"Volunteered?"

"Remember the Merck programs?"

Adele gasped. Families had signed their children away to them, under the bizarre reorganization laws of the economic collapse in the early 20s. Most of them had never emerged.

"You volunteered?"

Alex nodded, looking away. "My parents leased me out, before that. Some of the families were okay. Some had...odd ideas about what constituted family activities."

Adele pushed over to Alex and tried to embrace him. He pushed her away, not looking at her.

"I'm sorry."

"They loved each other," Alex said. "Mom and dad had one of those old-time marriages, with penalty clauses. They'd never be apart."

Adele said nothing.

"I don't know what Merck did," Alex said. "I don't remember a lot of that time. I remember going into a lab, one day, and saying, 'Why are you doing it like that, when you can do it like this?' That's when they made me a student."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

Adele felt tears welling in her eyes. She wiped them away. She went to Alex, put her arms around him, and held him tight even when he tried to push her away. They thrashed away from the window and out into open air. They floated, spinning slightly.

"I just want to see what we can be," Alex said. "I don't know if I can be what you want me to."

### 3

The bar he liked was in old Quito. Converted from an old internet café, it still ran random screenshots of Web 1.0 stuff on dim and battered LCD flatscreens. At several tables, there were even reproductions of ancient computers – iMacs, Dells, Compaq laptops – connected to complete working archives of the internet circa the turn of the century, hidden in matchbox-sized processors under the tables.

Alex preferred the bar. He'd been born at the advent of Web 2.0, and even if he understood how revolutionary the turn-of-the-century apps were, he couldn't understand the attraction of interacting with simulated personalities on old-time message boards, or bidding on Ebay items long since passed.

The white-haired bartender had deeply tanned skin, like polished mahogany. He hadn't spoken more than five words to Alex in all the times he'd been there. Today, though, a younger man was at the bar, and Alex caught the man looking at him.

When the bar got quiet, late that evening, the bartender came over and stopped. "You're the rich guy, aren't you?" he said, in perfect English, with no trace of a Spanish accent. Alex must have looked surprised. "Expat," the bartender said. "I just look the part."

"Oh. And yes, I'm him."

A nod. "What possible sorrow can *you* be drowning?"

Alex laughed. How could he explain? Adele didn't understand. Why would this man?

"I'm Rafael Quincero," the bartender said, offering a hand.

"Alex –"

"Farrell. Yeah, the rich guy. Why don't you go up the beanstalk, rich guy? Or at least go to a hotel tower in downtown? Are you pining over some woman?"

Alex shook his head. "I'm pining over all the things I'll miss."

"I don't know what you mean," Rafael said, frowning.

"I need to invent a time machine." *To see what's coming, to get beyond this small-minded Winfinity crap, this caveman stuff, my club is bigger than yours, you obey!*

Rafael grinned. "We already have time travel."

"What do you mean?"

Rafael turned to the bar and pulled a bottle of El Tesoro tequila off the shelf. He put it on the scarred wood in front of Alex.

"I don't understand," Alex said.

"Tequila is time travel in a bottle," Rafael said. "Drink enough, and you wake up in the future."

Alex laughed. Then he jumped. He felt a hot shiver pass through his body. "What did you say?"



"Drink enough, wake up in the future."

Alex picked up the bottle and held it in his hands. It was warm. The amber liquid sloshed back and forth, a tiny fractal sea. That was it. That was what he had to do. Go to sleep. And wake up in the future.

"Thank you," he said, clutching the bottle.

Rafael looked uncertain. "I was just joking."

"I'm not," Alex said. He beamed the barman ten thousand Winfinity points and ran out the door. He ran through town, clutching the bottle and yelling. He remembered long-forgotten physics lectures about old Greeks and hot baths. He didn't care.

That was it. He didn't have to miss anything. All he had to do was miss the stuff in the middle.

.....  
Alex didn't come that night.

He did not come to Shekinah's room. They did not take their walk. He did not try to teach her harder words. He did not show her pictures or tell her things she did not understand.

"Play," she said. "Fun." Two new words. She wanted to remember them. So Alex would smile.

"Smile." Another new word. She'd almost forgotten it.

"Smile, smile, smile," she said, trying to press it into her mind. Her head hurt again.

She waited until it was dark, then lay down on the bed. Thinking about Alex coming to her, comforting her. It was good to think about that. It soothed the pain in her head.

One of the others had tried to comfort her, but he fell screaming on the ground. Shekinah had never seen him again. After that, the others besides Alex stayed far away from her. They didn't answer when she repeated her words to them.

Her words. Were there others she had forgotten?

She stood. She paced. The night smelled of clean vines and grass. She wanted to run. She wanted Alex. Her wings were restless, and her back ached. She leaned them against the wall, willing Alex to appear.

Eventually, she went back to lie on the bed.

She wondered if Alex would come the next day. Or the next. Suddenly the days seemed to stretch out ahead of her, clearings along an endless path.

Shekinah whimpered. She had never thought anything like that. Things to come. Many days.

She imagined days stretching back behind her, but the path was shrouded in mist, gray and diffuse.

"Alex," she said, softly, as sleep came.

.....  
Western States Mining was in the middle of Nevada's Unincorporated Territories, where the last core of libertarians and socialists and constitutionalists and anarcho-capitalists had come to thumb their noses at the Winfinity-Reformed States conglomerate, which was only too happy to ignore them.

*Until now,* Adele thought, watching the tanks slowly fill with metallic silver.

They were inside one of the old mines. It was cool and dark, and smelled like dust. Support timbers, gray with age, bore graffiti with ancient dates: 1932, 1977, 2000.

The nanoextraction system made only the smallest noise, a faint liquid rushing. Deep in the mountain, she knew, water coursed through all the abandoned tunnels, all the played-out veins, binding and releasing silver in a mindless mechanical dance. The process ended here, where the silver was unbound, captured, dried, and eventually melted into ingots.

"What extraction rate are you running here?"

"About three grams per gallon per hour," said Charles Strathern, the golden-haired President of Western States Mining.

Adele nodded. It was about twenty times the rate of their best process. "This is built on Nanolife templates?"

A shrug. "If it matters. We don't recognize your IP here."

"And you have no nanoprocess permitting from Winfinity?"

Charles squinted at her. "If you aren't interested in buying, we don't need you here. The door's that way. Don't let it hit you in the ass on the way out."

Adele held up a hand. "Just getting the lay of the land." *You may not recognize our IP, but you have no problem selling improvements back to us.* She wondered briefly how long it would take the Nanolife labs to duplicate their feat, but quickly dismissed it. If she didn't buy it, someone else would.

Charles crossed his arms. "You've seen the process. Are you interested?"

"Possibly. How many cycles will the nano tolerate?"

"Seven, eight hundred."

"What's the efficiency delta between inception and end of life?"

"We define end of life as one sigma deviation."

Adele nodded. *Good.*

An anxious-looking man wearing a Western States Mining jumpsuit burst into the room, earning an irritated glance from Charles. "Ms Yucia," he said, "you have a visitor."

"A visitor?"

"Yeah. He's outside."

Adele ignored Charles's exasperated look and followed the other man out into the searing sun.

Alex Farrell paced underneath a personal VertiJet. As soon as he saw Adele, he rushed over to her. Little beads of sweat gathered on his forehead, like tiny crystals. His hair was spiky and unkempt, and his blue eyes darted from her eyes to her lips to some point in the sky, as if he was unable to decide what to look at.

"I figured it out," he said, taking her by the arms. His grip was tight, hot. "I know what to do! But I need your help. You have to help me."

Adele tore herself out of his hands. "I'm seeing someone else now."

Alex looked at her, through her, as if he didn't know what she was saying. Anger burned her gut, like a poker shoved into her ribs. *I spend all this time finding someone who I can tolerate, someone who might, in a decade or two, allow me to forget you, and you don't even care, you can't even take a moment to pretend to be sorry.*

"I can't do it without you," Alex said. "Without Nanolife."

*You don't even want me!* Adele thought. She imagined kicking him in the crotch, leaving him to lie in the hot desert dust.

Finally, something in her expression made an impression. Alex's crazy-happy grin vanished. "Adele? Are you okay?"

"I was in the middle of a business deal."

"Oh."

Alex looked so chastened that she immediately felt guilty. "I also can't believe you came here. To America. Winfinity is less than thrilled with you right now."

"This isn't America."

"Winfinity still thinks it's theirs for the taking, whenever they want."

Alex danced from foot to foot, the portrait of an impatient child.

Adele sighed. "What do you want, Alex?"

"I figured it out. I know what to do now."

*If the next words to come out of his mouth are about Shekinah, I will kick him in the crotch,* Adele thought.

"Terraform Venus," Alex said.



For a moment, all she could do was look at him. The words seemed to have no meaning. She tried to put them together like a jigsaw puzzle.

"Yes!" Alex said. "Everybody's thinking about Mars, but what about Venus?"

"You're not serious."

"I'm one hundred percent serious."

"It would take hundreds of years."

A grin. "Thousands, actually. About two thousand eight hundred or so, by the best simulations."

"You...you'd never see it."

The grin became a smile, bright and almost maniacal in its intensity. "That's what you think."

Adele shook her head. She wondered if Western States was listening to their conversation. She wondered how serious Alex really was. "Show me," she said.

"I can't do it here," Alex said. "Too bright."

Western States let them use one of their unused mineshafts. Adele didn't suppose they had it bugged, but she scanned and flashed it regardless. Alex waited until she was done, then showed her diagrams on a small smartfogger. Dust-motes danced inside the diagrams, sparkling like tiny stars.

"It's simple," he said. "All it takes is one little package and a lot of time."

First, he showed her the space elevator. At the far end of the tether, a small package was released into space. A closeup showed it packed with a cross-section of the latest nanotech: miners, shapers, builders, heavy instruction-units and overseers.

"A lot of industrial nano already runs at higher temps than the surface of Venus, and the extra heat energy lets us run it fast and efficient."

The viewpoint changed to show the package's trajectory, traced with a bright green line. The line intersected a brilliant white ball that circled the sun, well inside Earth's orbit: Venus.

"Here's the best thing. Everything can be done under Venus's cloud cover, so nobody needs to know what's going on. We can even simulate the clouds later on, so it stays invisible."

The viewpoint changed again, to show the impact of the package on Venus. It spilled nanotech near one of the poles, where it started transforming the ragged surface of the world into a shimmering crystal city, edged by deep green jungle. "The jungle probably won't work," Alex said. "One of those old pulp ideas, kind of fun but impractical. But we can create the crystal cities. In fact, with the amount of carbon dioxide we have to bind, we need a diamondoid economy. We can literally pave the streets with it."

Adele watched, dumbfounded, as the planet sprouted pole-ringing crystal cities, green jungles, and far-scattered lakes. She blew out her breath. Until then, she hadn't realized she'd been holding it.

"But...you said it would take three thousand years."

"Twenty-eight hundred. Don't exaggerate."

"But..."

"Imagine it," Alex said. "Our own planet. Our own world. Complete. Ready-made. No bidding on Winfinity's Martian parcels. No regulation. We do this right under everyone's noses."

"How do you expect to live for twenty-eight hundred years?"

But he just smiled. "I don't expect to live," he said. "I expect to sleep."

"What?"

"Like time travel in a bottle. Drink enough, and you wake up in the future."

"Alex, what's wrong with you?"

He picked her up, spun her around. "Nothing," he said. "For the first time, nothing."

Adele made him put her down. The hologram was now doing a flythrough of one of the Venusian cities, gracefully curved crystal spires rising above shining avenues.

*Could he do it?* she wondered. *Could he?*

"How do you expect to keep this secret?"

Alex smiled. "That's the easy part. Nobody has to know. Send the package, go to sleep, wake up later."

"So you've figured out hibernation?"

"No, but I'm sure one of the brainshot kids has."

"And nobody will dig you up during those twenty-eight hundred years?"

A quick frown. "So maybe I have to go to Alpha Centauri or something."

Adele laughed. It was beyond credibility.

*Or was it?*

She made him pack up his show. She promised to help him. Then she went to finish her deal with Charles and Western States Mining.

"About time," Charles said, when she returned.

"Shut up," Adele said. "We're about to make you rich."

Charles opened his mouth, closed it, let it turn into a smile.

But Alex and two Western States miners burst into the room. They were covered with dust and Alex's suit was torn.

"Winfinity," Alex said. "Win-Sec. My jet's destroyed."

"We'll give you two hundred million Winfinity credits for your IP," Adele said. "Final offer. Accept now and you're a rich man. Wait and see if Winfinity offers you something better."

"I accept," Charles said.

There was the sound of gunfire from the mine, coming closer to the processing room.

"Please tell me there's an alternate route out," Adele said.

Charles nodded and told them.

The two Western States men rushed them down tunnels to a helicopter hidden under a camouflage net. Adele watched as Alex took off, heading south to Mexico.

Suddenly all her business deals, her entire life, seemed so very small.

*Do it, she thought.*

Rafael Quincero and Shekinah came with Alex to the Moon.

"Because their fingers are starting to reach down here, too," Rafael said, watching a shiny new Winfinity transport whirr through the cobbled streets of Quito.

Because Shekinah wouldn't let him go, when she finally understood that he was going away. Alex pointed up at the three-quarters Moon and told her they were going there. Shekinah nodded, her big

eyes widening even farther. Alex knew she didn't really understand. Not until they went up the elevator and stopped at the flingpoint. When her weight fell away, she wailed like a frightened child and clung to him again. He tried to tell her what they were doing in words small enough for her to understand. But she just looked at him with big tear-filled eyes. Alex held her close, trying not to think about the softness of her feathers, or the fluttering of her heart, or



Rafael's eyes, heavy on his back.

"You're a rich man," Rafael said, when Alex asked if Shekinah bothered him.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a free pass."

"So I can do whatever I want?" Alex said.

Rafael nodded. "Exactly."

*But that's not true*, he wanted to say. But Rafael, like Adele, wouldn't understand his failures as failures.

And there were things he didn't want to think about too much. He'd never looked at the results of Shekinah's gene sequence. He didn't want to hear a computer's voice tell him that she was 67% of this, 15% of that, 8% of something else, and shared less than 50% of her genome with humanity. Or whatever it ended up being.

On the Moon, the geeks who hadn't made it to Mars were trying to engineer their own escape. In the middle of the great Google logo, painted fifteen years ago in carbon black, railguns shot raw materials at an irregular blob of darkness that whirled in orbit. The first real starship, designed to carry an entire community across the light-years to a new place where the madness of humanity was unknown. From Torvalds, the main lunar settlement, the starship could be seen only by the stars it occluded, or the occasional orange-red cooling edges of the ceramics and aerogels spawned by the nanotech. Rumor had it that Winfinity or one of the other Earth governments had tried to probe the starship. Or maybe destroy it. The probe (or weapon) had disappeared into the seething darkness. By now, it was part of the still-growing ship.

Asked about their starship, the geeks grew silent, or gave sharp little nervous laughs and smart-assed remarks.

"When will it be done? Well, when it's done, of course."

"How big will it be? Well, we won't know until it's done."

"What's its operational life? Well, it'll last until we're there. We hope."

And so on. Rafael quickly found employment as a bartender, but he got no more information than Alex. And Shekinah stopped conversation wherever she went. Until the whispers started. About the rich guy and his pet. Or his lover. Or whatever it was.

For once, Alex was glad that she didn't understand very much. Even then, he spent long hours calming her, explaining why she couldn't come with him, trying to tell her why she couldn't go outside.

"Go out!" she said, scratching on the window. The sound of her nails on the diamondoid was like the wail of a dying animal.

"You can't," Alex said. "They don't have a suit that will fit you."

"Out!"

"You'll die."

A wail. More scratching.

She never understood, so he had a spacesuit made for her. It had to be one of the old-style ones, and he had to go to one of the oldest women on the Moon, who had to make entirely new molds for her vacuum-forming equipment. At first, she looked at him with suspicious crystal-blue eyes, set into deep folds of brown flesh. Then, as he and Shekinah came back for a second fitting, then a third, then a fourth to see how far her wings could be folded back, she softened.

"You're the nanotech man, aren't you?" she said.

Alex nodded. "Alex Farrell, but you know that."

"I know nothing." A pause. Then a hand, like a weathered leather satchel. "Gina Richardson."

Gina worked a while longer, rebonding seams, adding material, cursing. Then she turned to him. "Why you here, nanotech man?"

"Shekinah," Alex said. She'd gone to the window, to look out over the bright gray landscape. "She doesn't understand why she can't go out."

Another long pause. Then: "I meant, why you here? On the Moon." Alex sighed. "I don't know."

"Man like you has a reason. You could buy the world, if you wanted."

"Nothing to buy here," Alex said. "Nobody will talk to me long enough to sell me anything."

"I meant the other world," Gina said, nodding skyward.

Alex laughed. Another who didn't understand. Sentiment at Winfinity had hardened against him even more, Adele said. "I can't buy Winfinity," he said. "I can't even go back to Earth."

Gina nodded, but said nothing more.

When the suit was done, Alex took Shekinah to the nearest airlock and let her run on the soft powder surface of the Moon. She leapt in the air, crying with delight. Alex wished her wings were not folded tight against her back. With them unfurled, she would look truly like an angel, silhouetted against a surreal night sky.

They played until Shekinah got tired. Alex thought he saw Gina watching them through a window, once. But when he turned, she wasn't there.

Later that week, one of the men he had talked to before came to sit by Alex in the bar. His name was Steven Kowalski. He name was most often mentioned by the conspiracy theorists and apocalyptics back on Earth when they talked about the spaceship growing at the Moon.

"What are you doing here, rich man?" he said.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll figure it out eventually."

A pause. "How long you going to be here?"

"I don't know. Until I'm finished, I guess."

Steven clenched his jaw and muttered. Looked away. Finally, sighed. "Okay," he said. "I deserve that. Let's talk."

"For real?"

"For real. What do you want?"

"I need a spacecraft," Alex said.

Steven looked surprised. "Our starship? It's not for sale."

"No."

A pause. "Then go back down to Earth and write a check. You have the cash."

"I need something different. What's the operational life on your starship?"

A sigh. "In the range of five hundred years. We're hoping to get up to ramjet speeds –"

"I need longer than that."

"Longer?"

"Say, three thousand years."

Steven stopped moving. He turned to look at Alex. His eyes were cool and unreadable. "Three thousand years? What do you need that for?"

Alex gave him a slow smile, but said nothing.

Steven shook his head. "Five hundred years is tough. I mean, the ship isn't so much manufactured as it is alive. Even then, after five hundred years there are likely to be massive transcription errors. We can develop for some of the worst-case scenarios, but we don't really know what the ship will grow into. It might end up, uh, where we're going, in dramatically different shape than when it started."

"And you'd still get on it yourself?"

Steven nodded. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it's getting scary," Steven said. "Have you seen what they're teaching in schools these days? About government? Want to bet what Winfinity's plans will be for the next century? I'm hearing indentures, control networks, stuff like that."



"So it's worth it," Alex said.

A nod.

"I need something that can last three thousand years. It's worth it."

Steven sighed. "I suppose if it was stripped down to the very basics – not much more than a ballistic shell with an opening to get things in and out – we might be able to do it."

"I'll take the chance."

"Are you serious?"

Alex nodded. "Dead serious."

A strange expression overtook Steven. A ragged smile, a gleam in his eye. Something like wonder.

"I also understand you're working on human hibernation."

"We are."

"How long can you keep someone on ice?"

Steven shook his head. "Not long. That's why we're thinking generation ship. Though that isn't set in stone."

"Three thousand years?"

Steven laughed. "No, no way. A year. Maybe ten. A hundred, no way. Thousands? You'd have to virtually rebuild the body on a continuous basis."

"Then that's something else to work on."

Steven started. His eyes went wide and he goggled at Alex, in almost Hollywood fashion. "You...you're going to help us?"

"As much as I can," Alex said. He'd have to be careful about moving things around, so it looked like he was working on some personal project Winfinity wouldn't care about, but he could bring more resources to the Moon. And maybe even some of Nanolife's best brainshots.

Steven swallowed, his face slack in wonder. In that moment, Alex knew he believed. He believed it all. Steven had his own list of things he wanted to see, and he'd do whatever it took to see them.

"What's lasted three thousand years?" Steven asked.

Alex shrugged. "The pyramids. Some religions. I'm sure a few other things."

"But...to do it physically?"

Alex nodded.

Steven stuck out his hand. "It's good to meet someone crazier than I am."

Alex called Rafael over and ordered drinks, Shiraz nanolife-produced from California wine templates. They raised glasses.

"What are we drinking to?" Steven said.

"To going out. Over the horizon," Alex said.

.....  
Shekinah did not like the place that was smooth and cold and smelled of rock and fear. Even when Alex took her out to leap into the night-sky-with-sun. Jumping was fun, but her back ached from the strange coverings they put on her. She scratched at them, but could not get them off.

Alex took her to a new place, one where the rock still smelled hot and bright lights lit up a large cavern. He smelled happy and bright. He jumped in the air. She did the same. She sailed up towards the top. Alex did that a few times, then started to smell disappointed.

"Fly," he said, making motions like his arms were wings.

"Fly," Shekinah said. The new sound meant nothing.

Alex jumped in the air and flapped his arms again, like wings. "Fly, like this," he said.

Shekinah jumped up and flapped her wings. She fell slowly back down. Her back hurt.

Alex clapped his hands and showed his teeth. Shekinah tried it again, and again, and again. Then her back hurt too much and she stopped. She rubbed her shoulders, her sides.

Alex put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Are you all right?"

It was almost too much for Shekinah to understand.

"Back," she said. "Hurt."

Alex turned his lips down and kneaded the muscles in her shoulders and sides. Shekinah moaned. It felt good. Like the comfort Alex would never give her. Dim images of many nights spent trying to get him to stay, of crying alone afterwards, came to her.

Shekinah whirled to face Alex. Her claws shredded his clothes. She clung to him as he tried to scramble away, as his smell went to fear. But she could smell his need, too. She shrugged out of her thin dress. She clung to Alex, digging in her claws. He tried to push her away. He grew hot and hard, on her belly.

Shekinah pulled herself up and dropped down on him, feeling his heat, feeling him fill her. She groaned and threw her head back, shivering in comfort.

Alex's scent changed again, from fear and arousal to something deeper and more complex, something she had smelled on him before. When the words were hard, when she did not remember them.

But she writhed against him, and for a time they moved as one. Alex even gripped her to him, towards the end. Then she cried in the explosion of comfort. Alex made a low noise. His eyes spilled water.

Shekinah released him, strengthless and satisfied. Alex laid by her for a moment, then pushed himself away. He smelled strongly of that low scent and of fear as he picked up fragments of his clothes.

"Thank," Shekinah said. The sound he used when she brought him food. Another sound he tried to teach.

Alex looked up. His little eyes were round. "I'm sorry," he said.

Shekinah didn't know what he meant, so she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

When she woke, she was in the little room with the window that looked out over the gray land and night sky with sun. She remembered the night before. She smiled.

When Alex opened the door, later that day, there were two other men with him. They wore clothes that smelled like the new place, like cool stone. They smelled slightly of fear.

She went to Alex's arms, but he pushed her away, making lots of noises, beckoning her to follow. She did not want to play, but Alex stunk of fear. She followed.

He took her to a big room where there were many shiny things. She looked at her distorted reflection in some of the things. Alex talked to another man in the room. The noises he made were fast and low. Shekinah caught her name, and a few of the noises: more, small, fun. Alex kept looking at her when he spoke. He showed his teeth, but he did not smell happy.

A strange feeling came to Shekinah. She had not made him happy. She had failed. It was a dark, terrible thought. Images of sharp pins and headaches came. Before and after. The feeling of being changed.

Was he going to change her again?

Shekinah smelled something familiar-yet-not. It took her a few moments to realize she was smelling herself, her own fear.

Alex and the other man stopped and showed their teeth. They looked at her. Their teeth were like a cat's, bright white and sharp.

Shekinah backed away, but the other two men caught her arms. She struggled against them, but they were very strong.

She felt a sharp pain in her arm.

Then Alex's face, bending over hers.

Then nothing.

.....



In the smartfog, Adele fell towards Venus. Beside her, Alex looked intently forward, his face painted by the reflection of brilliant white clouds. He darted a glance at her, twitched an uncertain smile, and looked forward again, chewing his lip.

*What's the matter?* Adele thought. *Don't tell me the ship is a no-go, and I came up to the Moon for nothing.*

Venus's bright clouds stripped away as they fell, revealing a city of neon-lit crystal perched on top of the world. They swooped through forests of tall, long-needled trees and approached the city. The sun hung low on the horizon, spread wide and golden in layers of haze. It cut through the transparent towers of the city, painting them with a soft, warm light. The city glowed, as if in distant memory, Vaseline smeared on the lens of reality.

They flew between the towers, slowing to show beautiful details: etchings in the diamondoid in a neo-art-deco style, heroic men and women of science struggling to turn the gears of immense machines, sunrises dawning over rolling perfect fields, antique spaceships thrusting towards stylized planets.

Adele and Alex soared above the city to a room at the top of the highest tower. It looked across spires of tapered grace, and arches of mathematical perfection, down a broad avenue that led into the city, gleaming and perfect and clean. Inside, a man and a woman reclined on a couch, holding hands.

"Excellent work. Very detailed."

"EA Games already had most of the templates."

Alex gave a nervous little laugh. "Of course."

Their POV whizzed up and around the planet, from dayside to

night. Dayside showed grasslands and deep-green forests, punctuated by bright blue lakes. Nightside showed frozen lakes and dead gray forest. At the terminator, the trees slowly came back to life, the lakes slowly melted.

"Which is why the cities are at the poles," Adele said. "There's no good mechanism for increasing rotational speed, but with the limited axial tilt, polar cities will have a sun that's always just above or below the horizon."

"Climate?"

"We'll have to leave some reflectance in the upper atmosphere to get the poles to shirtsleeves."

"The equator?"

Adele shrugged. "Best guess says it won't be fatal on the dayside."

"What's not fatal?"

"Not much over fifty or sixty degrees C."

Alex nodded. "Sounds great. When do we start?"

Adele glared at him.

"What?" Alex said.

"You just don't understand, do you? Three thousand years, Alex!"

"So?"

"So all of this is guesswork! Get out the rabbits' feet, because you're going to need them. The bio you saw is guesses and BS. Nobody knows if we can really make trees that'll survive a Venusian night, so you might end up with a dead planet. And then there's the carbon problem. I'm still working out whether it would be better to bind it and railgun it out – which increases our chances of being detected – or split it and oxidize it out. No matter what we do, the nano probably won't be stable for three thousand years, not even if we run cold backups in orbit and reseed."

Adele expected Alex to wave a hand and tell her it didn't matter, but he only sighed. She turned off the smartfog and they were back in Alex's drab gray cubicle. He hadn't even customized his wall-screens. He sat on an unmade bed.

"What's wrong?" Adele said.

"Nothing."

"Is it the ship?"

Alex shrugged. "Do you want to see it?"

"Sure."

Alex took her down to a hallway that looked over a smoothly-sculpted cavern. Two men in bright purple jumpsuits looked down into the dimness, their eyes shrouded by dataspecs. Below them, Alex's ship grew. Its rainbow-slick gray coating shimmered and danced, like a dirty soap-bubble. She could feel the heat of the nano coming through the diamondoid windows.

"Do they know what it is?" Adele said, nodding at the Moonies.

"They think it's a toy," Alex said.

"Are you sure?"

Alex frowned and handed her a pair of dataspecs. She put them on and looked down at the growing ship. In place of the gray blob, there was a cutaway. And a name.

"Hades? Isn't he Greek?"

"Better than Pluto."

"So are you the god of the underworld?"

"I may be," Alex said. "Or at least that's what Steven keeps saying. Twenty-eight hundred years is beyond the end of the nano's projected life, even running cold. And there's the radiation."

An image of Alex's body, blue and motionless, came to Adele. Hurtling through space on its unbelievable quest.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

Alex looked away. "Most of the ship is a lead matrix, just to pro-





tect me from radiation.”

The inner shell of the ship highlighted in her dataspecs. Inside, a body floated in liquid. Nanorepair devices crawled sluggishly through the liquid at only a few degrees Kelvin. An inset showed them comparing Alex’s cellular structure and DNA to stored templates, and performing repairs when necessary. “I won’t be able to wake up periodically,” Alex said. “Too dangerous. Not that I’d be able to turn around. We’re bringing some water to electrolyze into maneuvering fuel, but my landing will be dead-stick.”

“Alex – ”

“If all goes well, the inner lead matrix will part when I’ve landed,” Alex said. “If not, there are failsafe saws.”

In her POV, new cutaways showed the supercooled fluid draining from the passenger compartment, and a man reclining in a pilot’s

chair, banking the ship towards the outline of a city.

“Alex, why – ”

He held up a hand. “I don’t even get to see Alpha Centauri, because we can’t get enough velocity. I’m just a parabola to nowhere.”

“Alex, with this tech, we could be the most powerful people in the solar system.”

“And do what? Bring our gun to the fight? Drop bombs on them from our secret base on the Moon?”

In a sudden blinding flash, Adele saw them doing just that. One on Washington, one on Winfinity City, one on Hollywood. She shook her head. Even if they won, it was back to the same old game. The same old insanity.

“I’m going,” Alex said.

Adele nodded. “I know.”

## 5

Alex watched the package fly free from the tether. It moved so slowly he couldn’t tell the actual moment of release. It was small, only the size of a car. Gradually, its relative speed increased. It fell towards Venus.

*I could wait, Alex told himself. I could send monitors to see if the package begins replication.*

He shook his head. Even with the spoofing he’d bought, somebody would know. Somebody would talk. They’d ask about what he’d sent. And maybe they’d uncover the truth.

Newsbits floated in his dataspecs. MARTIAN TERRAFORMING ACCELERATES. NEW KEYS TO HABITABLE SPACE. NANORIDS: RESOURCES IN THE ASTEROID BELT. Every title tagged to one of the many companies Alex and Adele owned. So many companies these days. All running happily like bacteria. The lengths they’d pushed Nanolife and the Moon-geeks had given them breakthroughs to make life better, both on Earth and in space.

*Maybe we could challenge Winfinity.*

But that would mean staying. And waiting. And missing the grand ending. Winfinity was nothing more than an aberration, the corporation that ate the United States. In three thousand years, they’d gone from pyramids to nanotechnology. In another three thousand years, surely they’d conquer their own internal demons.

Alex imagined coming back to a system transformed. Three blue-green worlds to choose from. Maybe more. And perhaps indescribable wonders.

*Maybe there would even be a world where Shekinah could fly.*

She was still on the Moon. Alex had asked Steven to take Shekinah on their generation ship. He imagined her soaring in the skies towards the center of the habitat, where gravity was light. She would like that.

Alex went back down the ribbon and took a fling out to where his ship Hades waited.

A day into his fling, Adele called him.

“You’re clean,” she said. “There’s no activity in any of the info-swarms.”

“Good. Mission accomplished.”

Adele went silent. In his dataspecs, her lips pursed, like a child pouting when it didn’t get its toy.

*She’s beautiful,* he thought.

“They’ll notice you’re gone,” Adele said.

“Of course. That’s okay.”

“What if they look for you?”

Alex sighed. Old conversations, well-worn into familiar grooves.

He was the only one who knew the trajectory. And he’d be running dark and cold. “Let them.”

Adele just looked at him.

“Goodbye,” Alex said. “And thank you. For everything.”

“You can stay,” Adele said. “You don’t have to be with me. We don’t even have to change the world anymore.”

Alex shook his head.

“I love you, Alex,” Adele said.

Alex froze. He felt a slow shiver work down through his body. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“I can’t,” he said, after a time. “Stay.”

Adele looked down. “It’s that thing. That chimera.”

“Shekinah.”

“Whatever! Of course you love it! You made it into what it is!”

“I don’t...” *I don’t love her,* he wanted to say. It was an obligation. He couldn’t let her go. And she had so much potential. He imagined what she could be, in three thousand years.

“You don’t what?” Adele said.

Alex sighed. “Goodbye, Adele.”

Adele glared at him for a moment. Then cut the connection.

When she tried to call him back, Alex didn’t take it. He had said all he needed to say. All that he could.

When he neared the Moon, he called Shekinah. She ran towards his POV, grinning. “Alex! Missed you!”

“Missed?” Alex said. Rafael and Steven were teaching her more words.

“Missed, missed, missed!” Shekinah said, spinning happily.

“I missed you, too,” Alex said.

“Love you! Love love love!”

*Of course,* Alex thought. *They had to teach her that word.* He doubted if she really understood what it meant. The geeks muttered about braincase size and brain morphology, and shook their heads. *Like a child. Seven or eight years old. Unless we do more radical work.*

“Shekinah, I – ”

“Love you! Come see.” Shekinah wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes, as if embracing him.

“I have to go away,” Alex said.

“Come see me.”

“I can’t. I have to go. Rafael and Steven will take care of you.”

“Away?” Soft, plaintive. With her head cocked just so. Suddenly Alex was back at the terrible little show where he’d first met her. His eyes filled with tears. Little rainbows formed on the edges of the dataspecs’ images.



"I'll miss you."

"Come see!" Shekinah cried, beckoning.

"I can't."

Her smile became a frown. "Alex! Want Alex!"

"I'm sorry," Alex said. Thinking, terribly, *But she does understand this. She's making progress.*

"Alex come see!"

Alex shook his head. Tears spilled down his cheeks. He didn't try

to wipe them away.

"I love you," he said. And broke the connection.

When the Hades' disposable booster pushed him back in his seat, Alex still cried. *I could stay*, he thought. *I could go on the generation ship, when it was complete.*

But then he'd miss the end.

The cabin grew cold. Needles slipped into his flesh.

Consciousness ended.

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## 6

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It took the Angel of the Moon all morning to climb the one hundred steps to Winfinity's Hollywood office. It was a big white building with pillars out in front. It was new, but it looked old, like things she had seen in history lessons. The Winfinity logo rotated above it, suspended in air.

People came out of the building to watch her. Some wore dark gray uniforms with bright green letters that read WIN-SEC on the front. Others were just men and women in business suits, who watched her for a while and then went back into the building. Their eyes looked thin and angry, but they smelled like fear.

Once, a group of chimeras came out of the building. They all wore the little shiny collars that Paul had told her were for the ones who never worked their way to freedom. *Permanent indenture*, he called it, the words big and darty in her mind.

The chimeras walked right by her, only glancing. Their eyes were dead and still.

*I was like that once*, Shekinah thought. Faint images came to her, fragmentary and slow. Dancing in front of an audience in a place that smelled like alcohol and sex. Her second room, the one where she could go out and see the sky. Alex.

She closed her eyes, wishing she could remember his face. The treatments had done bad things to her memory. Alex was a shade, half-imagined. She heard his voice. *She-ki-nah. Shekinah.*

*I remember what you did for me, Alex*, she thought. *I will never forget that.*

She levered her thin body up another step. Her wings dragged on the ground. She had never felt this heavy before. She remembered soaring through the caverns of the Moon.

People came from the street to cheer her. They projected images of her flying. They projected images of other chimeras, in cages, at podiums, in sex farms. They projected words:

END THE EXPLOITATION!

STOP THE CRIPPLES!

WELCOME THE ANGEL OF THE MOON.

The people in the gray coveralls took those people away.

She made it into the cool stone lobby as people passed, smelling of hunger. The man behind the desk tried to look through her for a while. When she said who she wanted to see, he laughed.

She waited for a while, then asked again. And again. The WIN-SEC people drew close.

Then, a voice. "I'll speak to her," it said.

They put her in a lift with two WIN-SEC men, who would not look at her and smelled of terror. Shekinah wondered what they had to fear from her.

She shuffled into a large room that looked out over Los Angeles. They were still fixing some of the buildings from the big earthquake. Evan McMaster, CEO of Winfinity, sat behind a bare stone desk.

"Welcome, Angel of the Moon," he said. "I've enjoyed many of your videos."

Shekinah paused. She did not expect welcome. But he did not offer her something to eat or drink, like they usually did. His smell was masked with strong fragrance, but there was something like anger underneath.

"Mister McMaster, I ask a favor," Shekinah said, repeating the words that she and Paul had rehearsed so many times.

His eyebrows raised. "You're not here to raise a chimera army against my oppressive regime?"

"No." Not understanding completely. Words too fast.

Evan laughed. "That's good. I wouldn't want to lose my emperor's chair."

"Please, I want you to stop production of dumb chimeras."

Evan's eyebrows raised, and he breathed heavily, once. "But chimeras *are* typically of less than human intelligence."

"They don't have to be."

Evan sat back down and crossed his arms. "And how am I to stop this?"

"I have a list of companies. None of them are yours. You could buy them and shut them down. Or make a law."

"Why would I buy a company and shut it down? Companies exist to make money. Buying one only to shut it down wouldn't do much for our bottom line, would it?"

Shekinah struggled to grasp the words. She shook her head.

"Winfinity has over seven hundred million shareholders," Evan said. "They work hard to get through their indentures, then they work hard to move up, then they expect us to take care of them when they are old and retired. And we do. What would you tell all our shareholders, when we had to cut their benefits because we bought some companies and closed them down?"

"You could make a law."

"Again, why? Do you know how much it costs to enforce laws? What happens if we have to increase court costs because we made too many laws? What would you tell them then?"

"But...these companies create dumb things, when they could be making something smart!"

Evan's eyes narrowed. "How smart are you, on a human IQ scale?"

"I don't know."

"How painful was it, to get there?"

The shade of Alex danced in front of her, faceless. Paul, bending over her in that capsule on the Moon. Telling her that she had become all she could, he was mapping her mental function now, she might lose some of it.

Tears came. She closed her eyes to hold them back. "We can be made better."

"Why?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," Shekinah said. "Because you should care."

"Should I care about a steak? Should I care about a chicken?"



Low, dangerous. Anger overwhelmed his other fragrance.

"Please," Shekinah said.

Evan McMaster turned around. "No. This meeting is over."

Shekinah pushed herself forward on trembling legs. The WIN-SEC men grabbed her arms. They were very strong, and it hurt. She cried out.

"I'll do anything," Shekinah said.

Evan McMaster came to her and cradled a tear-soaked cheek. His smile was like a snarl. He stunk of anger.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Anything."

Evan laughed, spraying spittle in her face. "You have nothing I want."

"Please!"

"This meeting is over." Evan turned.

The WIN-SEC people led her out to the steps. They let her go, but waited around and watched her.

She made her way down the steps. It took the rest of the afternoon. She had time. They would not let her go back to the Moon.

She was an angel, but she would never again fly.

## 7

Adele knew she wouldn't live through her third rejuve. Because of the doctors. Her optilink whispered inferred meaning into her ears, even when they didn't speak. And she knew the gossip. Once, mostly, twice, for some, a third time, for none.

*If Alex was here, he would have figured out a better process, Adele thought. But he was probably outside the limits of the solar system now, still drifting along a long, slow parabola that would take him back to her, only about twenty-six hundred years late.*

She also knew because of the requests. *Before you go in, whisper one secret in my ear. Where is Alex Farrell? Where did he go?*

*Good luck with that, Adele thought. She'd had her own memories repatterned. She didn't remember Alex's trajectory herself. She didn't remember entirely what he did.*

Self-preservation, really. Winfinity had absorbed Nanolife by fiat and made her a Chief Executive. Then a Perpetual, when she proved to have true skills. They had allowed her to rejuvenate once, twice, and now, a third time.

She hoped to open her eyes to the thrill and energy of a body young, so exquisitely sensitive and perfect. She remembered her last awakenings, the feeling of wonder, that perfect moment of realization: *I would do anything for this.*

Winfinity had treated her well. As good as it could. But she still wondered what would have happened if Alex had stayed, if he had worked on the problem of rejuvenation, if he had decided to see his project through in body, rather than by escape. But he had never been interested in the in-between work. He wanted to see the end.

There had been days, dark days, when she thought of telling Winfinity where he had gone. When people first asked, in reverent tones, what he was like. When they asked where he had gone. The mysterious man who reinvented the world, and then disappeared.

Then the inference algorithms began to get very, very good, and Adele went to Mars, to the Independent people who lived outside of Winfinity, and had a very small part of her memory erased. The other Perpetuals knew she did it. But it was easy enough to tell them it was too painful to remember Alex. Only the very, very old found that hard to believe. And only a few of the very old ranked higher than her in the Winfinity regime.

And, in some ways, they didn't really care. The Moonies' generation ship had gone out into interstellar space, and they didn't waste time looking for it. Alex's ship was considered as a relic of that same age. Because it was a new world. They had happened upon the great fortune of the Spindle Drive, and instantaneous interstellar transport was a reality. She had stood on the cold green surface of Alpha Centari A's single ocean-heavy world. She'd heard the songs of its fractal bushes. And she'd left, like the rest of Winfinity, because there was no trade to be had with the bushes, even if they did prove to be intelligent.

But they'd found other worlds, other life. None of it intelligent. None of it more than a shade of the Earth's teeming biosphere. Sometimes she wondered about the meaning of that, late at night. Winfinity had no answers. The Consumeristians thought they had answers, but she could not believe them. They were too convenient, too pat, too facile.

It wasn't a terrible empire they had created, she thought. In many ways, no worse than government at the end of the 20th Century. People didn't have to work for Winfinity. They could join a hundred rival corporations. Of course, Winfinity benefits were always greater. And when you were considering a ten or twenty-year indenture, why would you go with a lower return? And it did make sense to hold back rejuvenation for the vast majority of the population. It kept population in check.

And it was the ultimate incentive. She would give anything to be young again.

They had given her a comfortable room in Winfinity City, overlooking the restored town of Rogers, and the rolling hills that framed the One True Shack. Those were icons too, for the people who did not remember where they came from.

They even surrounded her with young, cheerful medical staff who smiled too much, as if they knew she could read their minds. Like the young girl who came to see her that morning.

"Are you ready to be young again?" she asked.

*They are trying to comfort you, the inference algorithms whispered.*

"Sure," Adele said. Her voice was screechy with age.

"Nothing to it," the girl said. "You'll just wake up, young. Of course, you probably know that."

*This is a statement calculated to put you at ease.*

"If I wake up."

*She is shocked and afraid. She is thinking about calming you.*

Adele waved her hand. "Sorry. Never mind." *Let me die with my mind intact, please.*

They wheeled her into the room with the tanks. It was always nice, going in the tanks. Warm and soft. They put her in. Her optilink fed her a last question about Alex. She thought, one more time, *I could turn him in. I could tell them what he's done.*

But she didn't remember. She didn't remember at all. She remembered helping him. She remembered putting something in space to spoof Winfinity. But she did not know where. She remembered being very relieved when Winfinity took the Spindle Drive and began venturing outward, rather than looking in.

She did remember the name of his ship, the Hades.

*Where I am going soon.*

She slipped beneath the warm liquid, tasting its familiar salty tang. She closed her eyes, wishing to open them once again.



Alex Farrell opened his eyes, thinking, *Something's wrong.*

Nothing had changed. The cramped little cabin was the same as it had been when he closed his eyes. The little light-strips still glowed with the same intensity, the instruments floated in front of him, and the soft molded foam he reclined on felt as if he had just lain down.

He raised an arm. It rose smoothly, effortlessly. Not stiff, not slow, not in pain. He could have just dozed off, a few minutes ago.

*It didn't work. I woke early.* His heart thudded. What if he couldn't get back into suspension? What if he couldn't turn the ship around?

How far was he off? Had he ever gone into suspension at all? He glanced at the instrumentation, expecting it to show a date some time in 2032.

AUGUST 5, 4834

Alex sat up straight in his seat, banging his head on the low ceiling. No. It had to be a joke.

There was no way they'd worked out suspension so well. The geeks on the Moon had told him: *Most likely, you die. Second most likely, you are in terrible shape, like hundred-ten-year-old man. Third most likely, you something strange from transcription error in the medical nano.* They'd also warned him that many of the ship's systems were likely to fail, so even if he did awake, he might have no control.

He scanned the display. Other things jumped out at him: nanotech runrates averaging 99.5%. Better than when he was launched. Nano-systems didn't refine themselves for better performance. Their timeline was always clear: increasing replication error, until the system dropped off an efficiency cliff to become dumb matter again.

Alex had the instruments display his relative position. It showed a dotted line, arcing through the orbits of the planets, terminating near Venus. He zoomed out and saw his entire arc, with time and distance markers. The ship thought it had been on a 2,800-year journey, at least.

*The geeks. They sold me out. They never put me under.* Win-Sec was probably on its way to pick him up.

Alex turned on the communications scanner. Nothing. It didn't even show the low-power blocks where the geeks sent packets between the Moon and Mars. Flat down to the noise floor.

He frowned. It should show Earth bleed, even in the inner system. He aimed the directional antenna first at Earth, then at Mars. There was nothing coming from either planet.

*Of course, they disabled communication,* he thought.

Either that, or he really had gone 2,800 years into the future, and humankind had moved so far beyond the electromagnetic spectrum that he couldn't even talk to them anymore.

*Pyramids to nanotech,* he thought. *Nanotech to...what?*

The instrumentation fed him visuals, but the optics were only rudimentary. Fuzzy images of blue-green Earth floated ahead of him. Spectral analysis of the atmosphere showed:

24% O<sub>2</sub>

75% N<sub>2</sub>

1% OTHER, INCLUDING CO<sub>2</sub>, ARGON, AND HELIUM

POLLUTANTS BELOW DETECTABLE LEVELS

Wait. He called up the last reading taken, right before he left.

20% O<sub>2</sub>

78% N<sub>2</sub>

2% OTHER, INCLUDING CO<sub>2</sub>, ARGON

KEY POLLUTANTS INCLUDE OXIDES OF NITROGEN, CFCS, AND VARIOUS VOCs

He aimed the optical array at Mars. The wavering, uncertain image of a green and salmon-colored globe, punctuated by blue

spots, floated in front of him. Its atmosphere was 15% O<sub>2</sub>, 80% N<sub>2</sub>, 5% CO<sub>2</sub> and other gases.

They'd done it! They'd terraformed Mars! *He had gone forward.*

He turned the camera on Venus. It showed a smooth white globe. For a moment Alex felt a thrill of panic. Then he realized that the smartfog was supposed to stay in place until he came back. He had the ship transmit the command to drop the camouflage.

"Command acknowledged," the ship's voice said. "Camouflage will dissipate in about eighty hours. Arrival at Venus in about ninety-six hours."

Spectral analysis told him the atmosphere was unchanged, but his nanotech was already communicating with the ship, telling him it had a breathable atmosphere with slightly higher oxygen content than Earth. Than the Earth he remembered, anyway.

The nano even fed him images, vague and grainy clips of endless pine-like forest under a brilliant white sky. Clips of a brilliant crystal city, brooding in twilight. It told him that it was twenty-three degrees C in the city on that long night.

*I did it,* he thought. But, deep down, Alex felt a deep unease. Because, by the numbers, his ship should be limping along, and he should be dead.

*Or did I have help?* he wondered. *And, if so, from whom? Or what?*

On the display, Hades flickered a tiny bit closer to Venus.

Venus howled. The wind cut through the channels of his empty polar city, picking haunting notes from the knife-sharp edges of the diamondoid buildings. Lights within reflected and refracted through their translucent interiors, bathing the streets in a cool blue-white glow. The sky was heavy and gray, like lead, the far horizon shading to lighter gray above the hidden sun.

*I never named it,* Alex thought, as he walked towards his tower. Walked because he had never thought of transportation. Or the nano had degraded to the point where it dropped off the design chart. In his dataspecs, the nano efficiency showed 27%. Barely hanging on the edge of the cliff that fell towards dumb matter.

Which answered one question. His nano had degraded in-line with his forecasts. So he really was in the future.

*Or was he a simulated mind, plugged into some future virtuality?*

Alex shook his head. He didn't want to think about that. But it would explain a lot. His too-easy reawakening. Hades' increased nanoefficiency. He could be nothing more than computation.

But Alex doubted it. There were too many things, done too right. The alien overtones of the wind on the edges of his buildings. The little errors, like the razor-sharp edges and lack of transportation. Even the smell of the city, sharp with the tang of CO<sub>2</sub> and an unfamiliar, astringent odor something like pine.

And the sense of being alone. His footfalls on the diamondoid pavement were the only sound other than the wind. Nothing moved, except his shifting shadow cast by the light of the buildings.

*If Shekinah could see this, what would she think?* Alex wondered.

"Communication restored," the nano interface whispered in his earpod. He had transmitted archived specs to reverse its decline. As he watched, the efficiency bar slid up towards 28%.

"Why isn't there any transportation?" Alex asked it.

"Some complex structures were abandoned as efficiency decreased."

"Is there food?"

"Yes."

"An observatory? Someplace I can look at Earth?"



"Ground-based observatories would be useless due to residual shielding. There were no plans for an orbiting observatory."

"Have you detected communication from Earth?"

"That was not part of the original dataset."

Alex cursed. "How am I supposed to find out what happened to the rest of the solar system?"

"There were plans for an interplanetary ship. It is complete."

"There were?" Alex said, shaking his head. He didn't remember plans for a ship. He'd expected to come here and invite the people of Earth to join him on his new world. "Did you broadcast the invitation to Earth?" he asked.

"Yes. There have been no replies."

*Damn.* Alex wondered again if progress had taken Earth past any kind of electromagnetic communication. What if he literally could not talk to them?

Alex turned onto a wide avenue. He could see his building, rising like a crystal art-deco sculpture, at its end.

"Can I take the ship to Earth now?" Alex asked.

"It will take several days to fuel. Would you like this to be done?"

"Yes, please."

He sliced open his shoe on the razor-edges of the steps that led up to his building. As he watched, blood welled from a thin line on the top of his foot. He tried to smile through the pain.

"Can we fix the sharp edges?" he asked the nano.

"Sharp edges?"

"On the buildings and stairs. They seem to come to a single-atom point."

"It was not known that you desired rounding."

"I desire it."

"That will require active rework of the city, which will render portions of it unusable."

Alex imagined layers of slick gray nano coating the city. "Start in areas farthest away from me."

"Proceeding."

Alex was relieved to see an elevator waiting open in the lobby. Warm light spilled out of it. Something like woodgrain decorated its interior. He put his hand on it. It felt too cool and too smooth, like the rest of the diamondoid.

"Do the other buildings have elevators?"

"Some."

*Great,* Alex thought.

The elevator rushed upwards and its doors opened on his penthouse. Alex gasped. The far wall, transparent, looked out over a blue-white fairyland. His city rose and fell, swooped and spired, towards black lands. The gray splotch of the sun was offset to the east. In a month or so, the sun would rise and cast shadows down the broad avenue that led to his building.

This was what all those futurists always wanted to do. Tear down the city whole and start anew. Not piece by piece. A single integrated whole, designed for utility and beauty.

*I've done it.*

Alex found food. Little tangerine-sized spheres with a foamy consistency. They tasted like oranges. Slices of something too perfect and regular to be bread. A large, slightly greasy red slab that looked and smelled a little bit like beef.

He toasted the 'bread' in an old-fashioned toaster and paced the living room while he ate. It tasted like very good whole wheat bread, despite its looks.

He went to the transparent wall and looked out over the city. In the city, nothing moved. He could hear nothing, not even the howl of the wind. It could have been a picture painted on a wall.

Suddenly, a strange feeling welled up in Alex. It felt as if his chest had been opened up and hollowed out. It felt like his guts had been carved from ice. He hugged himself and shivered.

*I'm alone.*

He used a wallscreen to access the city's entertainment library. He played music, Halfway and Kraftwerk and Antony Palmiero and The White Plague, very loud. He had the wall show old movies, *Genero* and *The Matrix* and *Fugue State* and *Windex*, with no sound. He pressed his face up against the diamondoid, wanting to touch the characters that glowed within.

.....  
Tequila is like time travel in a bottle. Drink enough and wake up in the future.

*I'm in the future, but I'm not sure I'm awake,* Alex thought. It was three days since he'd landed on Venus. Four more until he could board the Aphrodite and see what had become of Earth.

He'd thought the silence around him was like the hushed time in the early morning. But it was more than that. It was as if the planets had stopped in their orbits. It was as if everything had fallen to absolute zero, and all atomic motion had ceased. It was the polar opposite of the grinding bump and garrulous buzz of the seedy end of Los Angeles. It was that pause at three o'clock in the morning, magnified and redoubled and magnified again. It was an ache in his chest, a physical thing, as if he would never be full again.

Adele walked through the door.

Alex stopped pacing and stared at her. All thought ceased. For a moment, it was as if the very ground beneath him rolled and gave way.

She crossed her arms, giving him a thin-lipped grin.

"You're not real," Alex said.

"No," Adele said.

Alex looked at her again. He noticed that highlights on her simple white dress bloomed and spread, like sunlight seen through haze.

"You're smartfog."

She nodded. "Close enough."

A moment of anger, like a knife pressed through his chest. "What are you? Leftover bits of her mind?"

"More than that."

"What?"

"I'm the best simulation of Adele Yucia that they could make, right before my first rejuvenation. Before I erased my memories of a man named Alex Farrell."

Alex felt the knife of anger twist again, to pain and confusion. "Rejuvenation? You erased me?"

"Winfinity's inference algorithms were getting too good. They would have discovered where you had gone – and what you were doing – if I hadn't made it disappear."

"You erased me?"

"To protect you! The spoof network I put in place around Venus kept their probes from reporting what you were doing, but I had to get rid of the knowledge. Completely. Then I sent my simulation here, to wait for you to come back."

Alex collapsed in a chair. He felt as if he had been punched in the gut. Adele...here and now...it was too, too much. "How long did you live?"

Adele gave him a wry grin. "How should I know? I simulated before my first rejuve. If I survived my second, I probably lived two hundred years or more."

"Could you still be alive...on Earth?"

Adele laughed. "No. By the time I went in for my first rejuve, they were already whispering about it working only a couple of times."



"They could have improved the process."

Adele hugged herself and looked around. "I doubt it."

"So you worked for Winfinity?"

"There wasn't much choice, after a while."

Alex shook his head.

"You would have, too," Adele said. "They controlled the world."

Alex nodded. Best not to argue. He realized, with a start, that the silence had receded, and his loneliness had disappeared.

"Thank you," Alex said.

"For what?"

"For coming to see me."

"Oh, Alex," Adele said. She came over to him and laid a hand on his. He felt a warm, wet breeze on the back of his hand. The feeling of smartfog.

"I though I was a simulation," Alex said.

"What do you mean?"

"When I awoke. It was too easy. I wondered if I had been turned into a simulation of myself, running on some massive computing system."

"If you were, how would you tell?" Adele asked.

"Exactly."

"So maybe we have more in common than we ever had."

"That's not funny."

Adele laughed. "I can embody."

"Embody?"

"I added some nano routines to your system."

Alex imagined Adele with him, in his empty city on the pole. He

thought about holding her in his arms. He saw himself waking next to her, on the too-slick sheets, on the too-sharp bed. He saw their children, running through the empty streets of the alien world.

"No," he said.

Alex looked at Earth from orbit.

Earth was a wilderness, seemingly untouched by humanity. The Los Angeles basin was an endless sea of golden grassland, swaying gently in the breeze. Scrub-bushes, eucalyptus, and oak crowded what had been the Hollywood Hills.

He took the shuttle down and stood on the hills that looked out over the San Fernando Valley, trying to divine the hint of an ancient grid. Any remains of the streets and buildings that had once risen there. Sepulveda. Ventura. He could see them in his mind's eye. But even when he hiked down to the valley floor, even when he dug into the ground with his hands, where he knew Ventura once ran, he found nothing. No trace that humanity had ever been. The ship's voice, blandly female, told him softly that there was nothing buried.

Alex returned to Aphrodite. His hands shook. The diamondoid glass of water clattered against his lips.

"Will you talk to me now?" Adele's shade asked.

Alex looked up, through the translucence of the ship to the softly-shrouded stars. "Did you know it was like this?"

"Only since we arrived."

Alex had Aphrodite image every square mile of Earth. In the middle of what used to be the Winfinity States, herds of buffalo grazed again. In Europe, great forests carpeted the ground, untouched by any axe. In Egypt, the Nile Valley was untouched by tombs. The Pyramids themselves had been erased.

He stood on the plains. The buffalo looked up, once, then looked away. The herd walked past him as if he didn't exist. As if he had never existed.

He stood on the banks of the Thames, and wondered if this was what the Romans saw when they first came to that land. A fox stopped to stare at him from the comfortable darkness of the forest. Its green eyes flickered. Then it leaped away.

And he visited his past. His house in Alaska. His home in Quito. All gone, wiped clean, like the wrong answer on a slate.

*Reboot*, he thought.

Could every trace of civilization be wiped clean in less than three thousand years? Aphrodite's mind told him no.

Could humankind have left to other stellar systems, to garden worlds discovered or created? Could they have wiped the slate?

No, Alex told himself. If they had done that, there would have been monuments. *We were here. We screwed up. But we fixed it. We leave it here, as we think it once was.* Something couched in florid turns of phrase that would only underscore its idiocy.

And even if most had left, there would be ones who remained behind. Humanity never thought with a single mind. And if they had left on generation ships, there would be those who turned around and came back. And if they had cheated lightspeed itself, there would be tourists. Footprints on the perfect Earth. Shops selling little trinkets, rocks encased in diamondoid, or tiny bits of the True Pyramids, or of Washington Fallen. Because that was the way people were.

"Will you talk to me now?" Adele asked. "I can help."

*How can you help?* Alex wanted to ask. *How can you even begin to understand?*

And the silence. Everywhere Alex landed, the silence. Not the silence of nothingness, but the silence of no human voice, no human activity. It made Alex feel like an ice-sculpture made of frozen oxygen, endlessly cold, infinitely untouchable. He imagined





building a house on Earth and living there, and cried terror. There was nothing human there, nothing for him.

*Have I come to a timeline where humans never existed?* Alex wondered.

No, Aphrodite told him, after it had finished its analysis. The shoreline of the east coast of the former Winfinity States was subtly different from the records it had, different in ways that suggested conflict with hundred-megaton weapons, rather than natural erosion. There was evidence that Earth's oil reserves were still depleted by the predation of the 20th and 21st centuries.

And, it said, there is biological and silicon detritus that suggests nanotechnological reshaping on a planetary scale. Much like what you have done to Venus.

Alex had a terrible thought. His plan to terraform Venus had gone awry. Part of his package had landed on Earth instead. He had brought about the complete destruction of humanity.

No, he thought. Venus's package was specific. It would only activate in Venus's environment.

"You didn't do it," Adele said, as if reading his mind.

*But it was done, he thought. Something did this. Something wiped humanity out, like a wrong answer, poorly given.*

"Mars," he told the ship.

.....  
Mars was like Earth. Rockport, gone. Winfinity City, gone. The south polar settlements, gone. Semillon Valley farms, gone. But hardy engineered grasses grew on the chill plains, and thin white clouds scudded across the blue sky.

Alex stood where Rockport would have been. Low, dark-green bushes crowded the sickly yellow-green grass. Here and there, salmon-colored boulders punctuated the landscape, their sharp edges slowly softening in the new rains.

He breathed in the chill air. It had a sharp tang, like chlorophyll and rust.

*I'm standing on Mars, breathing,* he thought.

He drew the air in deep. It was like standing at the top of Yosemite. Chill and thin.

*I'm standing on Mars, alone,* he thought.

After a while, he went back to the ship. Adele said nothing. But he imagined she was watching him, and thinking, *Will you talk to me now?*

"The Moon," he told the ship.

.....  
The geek-warrens were gone, as well as their blob of a ship, but there was a monument.

If you could call it a monument. On the lunar plain, there was a crystal stalk set into a semicircle of white concrete. The stalk rose thirty feet in the air, branching and rebranching, thinning and rebranching, until the ends of its stalks were nothing but a rainbow shimmer. The sun shone through the tree and cast shimmering colors on the white concrete.

At first, Alex paid no attention to the refracted sunlight. He went

to the base of the tree, where a single glyph was carved. It looked something like a stylized 'y', with a thick base that arced up to graceful curves, one drawn back on itself like a curlicue.

"What does that mean?" Alex asked Aphrodite.

"I do not know," Aphrodite said.

"I do," Adele said. Her voice was soft, guttural, sad.

"What is it?"

Adele didn't answer for a long time. When she did, her voice was little more than a whisper. "It's a symbol of the Angel of the Moon."

"What?"

Silence again.

"Adele, please."

"You wouldn't know," Adele said. "After you left, your... Shekinah became very famous. She was known as the Angel of the Moon."

Alex felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach. He went to examine the sunlight that danced on the white concrete. Its rainbows twisted and shimmered, changing slowly in the slowly-moving sunlight.

In the middle of the rainbows, Shekinah flew. Her wings beat slowly, dreamily. He caught hints of rock in the background. A cavern. Like that day, so long ago.

She turned, infinitely slowly, to look at him. Her clear blue eyes were drawn down in pleasure.

*She flew,* Alex thought.

"This is a memory structure," Aphrodite said. "Designed to impose a simulated mind onto the computational environment."

"The computational environment?" Alex asked.

"In this case, sunlight," Aphrodite said.

"I don't understand."

"The changing angle of the sunlight is the computational environment. Refracted through the diamondoid structure, it displays a result of the computation. Preliminary analysis of the structure suggests that it is more complex than can be delineated by a single environmental parameter."

"You're still not making sense."

"Didn't you ever read anything outside your field? Adele said. "Environmental computing is an old theory. The entire environment is computation. Sand automatically separates itself into coarse and fine grains when dropped on a predetermined slope. Things like that. If you could find a way to modulate your own equations onto the environment, the environment itself would solve your equations."

"The equations being this movie of Shekinah?"

"It is likely that the display you are viewing is only a fraction of the complexity of the diamondoid structure," Aphrodite said.

Alex blew out his breath, fogging the faceplate of his space suit. "So there are more movies stored in the tree?"

"There is enough complexity to simulate a mind, given the right environment," Aphrodite said.

"This...this is Shekinah?"

"No," Aphrodite said.

"No," Adele said, after a time.

.....  
*I just have to see his face,* Adele thought.

Adele waited, arms crossed, as Aphrodite landed on the outskirts of Venus's pole city. She had taken to calling it Erebus, for the volcano at Earth's south pole.

It was just like Alex to forget to name the city. On her first day out of the tanks, she had gashed her leg on the knife-sharp edge of

a diamondoid stair. Also just like him. Set the plan in motion, let the details take care of themselves. Except there were no people to fill in the details. Just dumb nano, executing his grandiose plan in the only way it knew how.

The sun was peeking over the horizon as the ship fell to the great sheet of diamondoid. Adele faced it, letting the warm wind of its



odorless exhaust wash over her.

Aphrodite extended a ramp. She limped to meet it.

Alex paused, once, at the top of the ramp, looking down at her with wide eyes. He walked down the ramp, head down, and stopped three feet away from her. His eyes flickered up to meet hers. His hands clenched, once, as if needing something to hold. He looked tired and sad and confused.

Adele felt a wave of concern wash over her. She wanted to take him in her arms, tell him it would be all right.

"Adele," he said.

She nodded. *And now he'll tell me I shouldn't have embodied, I should have waited, it wasn't the right time.*

Alex took one step and stopped. He wavered. Gave a tiny moan. Embraced her.

Adele stood stiff. *I could back away, she thought. I could leave him. I could fly away to Earth and live there. He would never find me. And it would serve him right.*

Alex sobbed, his head laying cradled on her neck and shoulder.

Adele put her arms around him.

They stayed that way for a long, long time.

After that night, they talked. Like broken talking-head dolls, parrot-ing comforting phrases as their sun-cast shadows moved jerkily

against the back wall of Alex's apartment.

"What happened to Earth?" Alex said.

"I don't know. Any more than you."

"Something changed it."

"Maybe."

He shook his head. "Not people. We'd leave monuments. We'd open shops."

"Maybe we've grown up."

"I have a model of Shekinah's mind," Alex said, after a time.

"I know."

He went to sit by the diamondoid window. He looked down on the empty streets. "I don't know what to do," he said.

Adele went to sit by him. She put her arms around him. He didn't try to shake her off.

"Are you real?" Alex asked.

Adele sighed. She'd already gone through that mental ping-pong, wondering what she was and who she was and if it mattered and if the mind was just computation, or if it was something else, and if the she-that-was somehow was aware of the she-that-is-now. There was no history. She could have died the day after getting her memory mapped by the independents on Mars. Or she could have lived two hundred years more.

"I'm here, now," she said, softly.

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## 10

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Alex waited for children that never came. A year passed, and their city grew softer. The nano built them parks for strolling and for play. Five years passed. Adele dropped hints, and Alex did the tests. He was fertile. So was she.

But there were no children.

Someone, something interfered, Alex thought, late at night when the wind had dropped to a low moan, and Adele lay by his side. *And something's still interfering. Something that had some magic greater than nanotech, something in control of forces beyond human knowledge and physics. Perhaps even humanity itself, uplifted out of the realm of matter.*

Ten years passed. Adele went away for a time, to the city on the opposite pole. Then she came back, long-faced and haggard. The nano showed him the body she'd built to consort with. It showed her crying when month after month passed without pregnancy. Alex welcomed her back with a hug and a smile. He never said a word.

Because, for some reason, it was all right. They were not supposed to reproduce. They were not supposed to continue. There was something he could learn from that. Something beyond, *There are always limits.*

Alex started his own project. He had all the old tools. Some even better than he remembered them, built with fragments of data from Adele's files she'd sent to Venus, fifty years after he left.

*I will live for another two hundred years, Alex thought. I have that time to work on this. And I can always simulate my mind and rebody.*

*But that isn't me, he thought, deep at night when the silence was only relieved by the sound of Adele's soft breathing and the beat of his own heart.*

Adele, to her credit, never asked what he was doing. On the night the new ship launched, invisible, from the other side of the planet, she came up behind him and said, "You seem happy."

"Content," he said.

"What do we do now?"

"What?"

"Keep rebodding? Keep waiting for God to pop out of the wood-work and say, 'Sorry for the misunderstanding, here's what happened?'"

And, in that moment, he wanted to tell her everything.

*You were right. I loved her. She's what sent me here. To escape that scary, scary fact. Yes, I wanted to see what we could be, but that wasn't all of it, not by a long shot. And when I get here, the only monument I find is to her. Like everything I did was really for her. Not for me. And so I have to do this. Because it doesn't matter to me or you. We will find our own way, and Shekinah will find hers.*

But instead he just shook his head and looked out over Venus, and thought of the package now hurtling towards the Moon. A hack of the Venus nano. Maybe it would work. Maybe it wouldn't. His skills were rusty. The Winfinity docs were shortspoke for headshots. But he could hope. And, if it didn't take, he could try again.

*And in a few thousand years when the Moon blooms, he thought, it doesn't matter if we're around to see it. In a few thousand years when Shekinah and her kind come back to life, your children will be the ones to meet them. And when Shekinah and her kin soar into the sky on brilliant white wings, maybe you'll feel something, something I could never truly express. Hope. Thrill of beauty. Manifold of possibility.*

"I don't know," he told Adele, finally. "But I won't leave you. Not again."

Adele cried and fell against him. He held her, sobbing. Maybe they would make more bodies. Maybe they'd make themselves into something ready to meet Shekinah and her kind as equals. Or maybe not.

Alex closed his eyes, seeing beings like butterflies dancing under a full Earth. ♡

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Jason's fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Sci Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Futurismic* and many other places. He is a finalist for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award and Sidewise Award for Alternate History, and his day job is in metaverse development. More information is available at [xcentric.com](http://xcentric.com).



Sean Randall's tour guide, a highly rated professional from Jetless Travel Agency, crossed the shiny steel hall of the jump room and greeted him with a bow so fake it was like Sean was looking in the mirror. "Hey man, I'm Haruki, pleased to meet you."

"You're not Japanese," Sean said. The man in front of him *looked* Japanese, but there was no way he was *really* Japanese. Not with that pink spiky hair and Pacific Northwest accent. He wasn't much older than Sean, either. Maybe even younger. "I was guaranteed a native. This is a weekend immersion tour."

Immersion tours were Sean's favorite. He got to see all the best sights, the ones the hotel tourists never saw. In Australia he'd been to a corroboree with his Aboriginal hosts. In Brazil he'd danced with four generations at Carnival. In Borneo...well, Borneo had been hard. But he wanted to see the real Japan. He wanted to sip tea and sleep in a room the size of a mousetrap.

"Do you even speak Japanese?" Sean said.

In response, Haruki let out a long string of incomprehensible syllables. Not that Sean would know the difference, but it sounded Japanese to him. Haruki then put on a face of mock hurt feelings, and held his hand to his chest.

"Sorry, man," Sean said. "My bad. It's just..."

"It's just that I dress New York City and talk Seattle, is that it?"

"Yeah," Sean admitted.

"And here I am in St Louis," Haruki shrugged, then looked down at a thick stack of paper in his hands. "Your file says you only do this once a year. Not a moment to lose then, eh? Step on up."

Sean stepped onto the jump dais. It was true, once a year was all he could afford, both in time and money. Jump tech wasn't cheap, was even more expensive than plane tickets had been back in the day, although the savings in travel time made the whole thing well worth it. But add on top of the jump the cost of the mandatory cultural guide, and it was all Sean could do to scrape the money from his lab tech job to travel that often.

"Get ready for two of the best days of your life," Haruki said. "I'm gonna show you a Tokyo the travel gurus themselves would kill to see." He joined Sean on the dais and checked his watch. Reflexively, Sean checked his. It was 5:59PM Friday, June 14th, 2020. One minute till the jump.

"Aren't you gonna change?" Sean asked, tugging on the sleeve of his new kimono. It fit perfectly, but he knew it made him look whiter and more western than cowboy boots and an I ♥ NY T-shirt would have. He felt the same awkward way in it that he did in a Halloween costume at a party. But Tokyo was strict about its Uniformity Laws. Also, it was considered the polite thing to do. His travel vids all said that the Japanese were very polite.

So why was this Haruki guy dressed like he was on the set of *The Urban Cultural Collective*? The silver chain of his wallet jangled softly in the artificial silence of the Jetless jump room. The patch on the arm of his leather jacket had definitely been designed by someone doing too many hallucinogens.

"Relax, man," Haruki said. "It's chill."

Sean wasn't so sure. He'd had bad luck with Hi Jump, his previous travel agency, or more particularly with their cultural guide. The guy had knowingly let Sean violate the Borneo Rural Uniformity Laws, and it had cost him the respect of the entire community. He didn't want a replay of his last trip.

"Look, I don't want to be rude," Sean said, "but -"

"But your last guide turned out to be the Son of Satan."

"How do you know..."

Haruki tapped his file. "Don't worry, man," he said. "Where we're going, the Uniformity Laws amount to a hill of beans."

# PSEUDO TOKYO

JENNIFER LINNAEA

Hill of beans? Where did they *get* this guy? "Maybe I'd better talk to your -"

"Eight up," Haruki said. He grabbed Sean by the wrist with one hand and placed the fingers of his other hand underneath the tattoo on his throat, moving his lips soundlessly. Sub vocalizing, Sean thought. Keying the jump sequence.

Then he was standing in front of a row of painted fans, and the air smelled of fish and flowers, the way he'd known it would.

He was in Tokyo.

"Follow me," Haruki said, and Sean let himself be led out of a small white room and down a softly lit hallway. Indirect lighting, pale wood floors, and just one well-placed potted plant near the end: every detail was even better than he'd expected. Sean breathed in deeply. Then remembered his watch, and looked down in expectation. He'd bought it just for this trip - it downloaded the time via satellite anywhere in the world. But the display showed just a row of zeros, blinking. Disappointed, he reset it manually to 8AM Saturday, fourteen hours ahead of St Louis time.

The hall opened out into a main customs area, and Sean gasped. It was *huge*. He'd known Tokyo was a center for world travel, but this was on a scale that dwarfed even the New York City hub, which he'd passed through for quarantine on his way to Brazil. A room big enough to house a skyscraper enclosed not one, but numerous processing units, where long lines of travelers waited for admission into the city. Walkways crisscrossed the empty space, and - he strained to see - *bicycles* sped along on them, hundreds of feet above the main floor. "It's incredible," he said.

"Yeah," said Haruki. Even he seemed awed, though it must have been a regular sight for him.

They descended along a spiraling walkway teeming with travelers from around the globe, and Sean understood what Haruki had been talking about. Almost none of them were wearing Japan-approved garb. Sean turned to his guide, who was gazing out over the customs floor with something like reverence on his face. "Why didn't you tell me the guide-vids were wrong? I look like a poseur."

It took Haruki a moment to turn away from the view over the railing. "You're fine, man," he said, and grinned. "You wanted the real experience, didn't you?"

Sean supposed that he had, but he still felt ridiculous in his pale blue kimono. He glanced around. Their fellow travelers were wearing everything from burkas to sarongs. Quite a lot of dyed hair and leather was in evidence. Haruki no longer stood out; he had become just another face in a swarming, world-culture crowd.

Sean didn't stand out either. No one was looking at him sidelong and snickering to their friends. He began to relax; maybe he wasn't the *gaijin* here that everyone had told him he would be.

He and Haruki came out onto the main floor and joined the line. It went quickly, and soon they were standing before a uniformed Japanese customs official. But what the man said sounded approximately like a cross between the hum of a diesel motor and his neigh-



bor's pet parakeet. Haruki responded in garden-variety Japanese, or at least that's what it sounded like to Sean, and the two of them were ushered through the checkpoint. Sean didn't even have to show his passport.

"What was *that*?" Sean said.

"What?" Haruki said.

"That man, the thing he did. That wasn't Japanese. What was he saying?"

"Oh," Haruki said. "That. That's a little-known dialect from the southern islands. Yaeyama-shoto, I think. And he had a bad cold."

"A cold," Sean said, but Haruki had already walked ahead and joined another line.

Everyone else in the building spoke normally, and by the time they came out of customs Sean had almost forgotten the whole thing. When he saw the streets of Tokyo, he forgot entirely.

"Come on," Haruki said, "let's storm this town." He took off into the crowd swarming in the street.

Sean's first hour in Tokyo was far more unbelievable than the guide-vids had promised. They got into a metro train so crowded Sean thought he was going to suffocate, and rocketed through the city. Out the window Sean saw all the teeming people, temples, and vending machines that he had been promised, all the ultra-sky-scrapers pushing in on street-side parks. But nowhere in evidence were the perfect haircuts and kimonos of the vids. He saw uniformed schoolgirls and neo-samurai, monks and punks and businessmen. A great explosion of culture reaching back to the pre-Uniformity days, and stretching ahead past where Sean's imagination gave out.

After a while, overloaded, he looked at his sandals.

They got off the train at a platform built of wood, overarched by pagodas of huge polished logs and carved filigree. It was nothing like the sleek, ultra-modern bullet train stations his vids said the Japanese were so proud of, and he looked around in awe. It was like going back in time, or maybe sideways, to a world where technology lived side by side with something ancient.

"Can I take pictures?" Sean asked.

"Of the train platform?"

Sean blushed, but got out his camera nonetheless. He got a shot of the filigree with the train in the background, and another with two businessmen leaning against one of the gigantic log pillars. In that one, a boy with bright green eyes stared at him from his perch atop a crossbeam; but when he took the camera away from his face the boy was nowhere to be seen.

Sean followed Haruki down a flight of stairs and onto a narrow side street. Old wooden archways stained with a hundred years of grease from the open-air fish vendors spanned the cobbles over legless beggars and chipped Buddha statues. The old men they passed were dressed in clothes that seemed historic in a way Sean couldn't place, until he realized they didn't sport a single logo. How they could wear that and not get arrested, Sean didn't know. He checked the collar of his kimono, reassured to see the neat black Japanese letters and wavy blue pattern of the manufacturer.

Little shrines with incense burning huddled in every nook, and Haruki stopped before one of them. Sean wondered if it was Shinto or Buddhist, but was afraid to ask. His guide-vids had given careful instructions on how to tell the difference, but this one didn't have any of the things they'd said to look for in either one. Haruki put a five-yen coin in a bowl on the shrine, which a little one-eyed girl snatched up as soon as Haruki closed his eyes to pray.

What was a hipster like Haruki doing praying?

Sean looked further down the street. There was an interesting statue a little way ahead, of a small being with webbed hands and

feet, and he went to look at it more closely. It had a curious indentation in the top of its head, filled with water, where little bits of Styrofoam and algae floated. He reached his hand in the water to take out the Styrofoam; it distracted him from his fantasy that he had traveled to a place out of time.

The statue blinked and took a step back from him, tilting its head back just a little to look into his face with its bottomless eyes. It said something in Japanese, and smiled. Behind him Haruki shouted, "Mr Randall!"

Sean was so amazed by the thing in front of him that he couldn't look away. Its skin was pale green, and smooth as rock, but it was alive. A living, non-human creature, and it had spoken to him!

"What did it say?" he asked Haruki, who'd rushed up behind him.

"Mr Randall," Haruki said, "if you value your life, bow to the kappa right now."

It was the uncharacteristic formality of the 'Mr Randall' that decided it. Sean leaned forward at the waist, feeling awkward and stupid, wondering what unwritten cultural norm he had offended this time. To his amazement, the thing bowed back, in the process spilling the water in its head onto the cobbles.

"This is incredible," Sean said. "What did it say? Tell it I'm sorry I don't understand Japanese." But the creature was no longer watching him with its fantastic eyes. It scowled at Haruki and took off down the street. Haruki waved his fist after it.

"Wait!" Sean said, but when the creature had disappeared into the depths of the alley he turned to Haruki instead. "What was that? That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!"

"Kappa," Haruki said. "Stay away from them."

"But, it was...it was..."

"It was a kappa, man, and they like to rip people's livers out through their anuses. If you hadn't tricked it into spilling its water it would have had you. Trust me."

"But it wasn't human," said Sean. It was a stupid thing to say. Of course it was human. Some deformed kid. Sean thought of Nagasaki and shuddered.

"Didn't tell you about *that* in your tour guides," Haruki said, and smiled, but the smile seemed thin to Sean. "C'mon, man, let's go." He tugged on Sean's arm, and Sean let himself be led away, feeling like the stupid foreigner he was.

Haruki said, "Shit," one second before Sean saw them. They stood in front of an ornate gate, touching everyone who went in or out with blunt metal rods. Sculptures, Sean thought, sprays of crystal tubing held together by hundreds of tiny beating hearts; only they moved like they were alive. Sean's head hurt with the strangeness of looking at them. He glanced at Haruki instead, and saw him biting his lip as he stared back at Sean.

"Do you know what those are?" Sean asked.

"Uh," Haruki looked away.

"You do!" Sean said. "Are they...?" He didn't want to say 'aliens'. He didn't want to sound crazy.

"Look man," Haruki said. "I thought I could get you to my family and back home without you having to see any of this, but if they've put guards at the gate to the spirit quarter it means -"

"Spirit quarter?"

"It's just a name, man," Haruki said. "Don't go sub-orbital."

Sean didn't think he was going sub-orbital. It was Haruki whose skin had broken out in a sweat, and whose hands were clenched at his sides like he might hit Sean if Sean said the wrong thing.

"Okay, okay, calm down," Sean said.

"Shut up," Haruki said. "I need to think."

"What's wrong?" Sean was really worried. Haruki's eyes had gone





ILLUSTRATED BY DARREN WINTER



glassy. He looked feverish, or desperate.

"I said shut up!"

Sean, a cold lump in his chest, shut up.

Haruki stared at the gate for a long time, gnawing on his lip. Finally he said, "I'm gonna have to leave you here. No, don't look like that, it's just for a little while. I'll send my brother to fetch you. It won't take long, I promise."

"I'm staying with you," Sean said, and he shuffled closer to Haruki, the hem of his robe brushing Haruki's polished leather boots.

Haruki growled, low in his throat. "I'm doing this for you!" he said.

"Doing *what* for me?" Sean said. People turned their heads to stare, and he lowered his voice. "What is the matter with you? I paid a lot of money so you would –"

"Shut up!" Haruki said again, even more fiercely. "I'm trying to protect your fragile, sheltered, poorly-traveled psyche from a bizarreness overload." 'Poorly-traveled' stung. It also surprised Sean, who had always thought himself quite the opposite. "If they've put guards at the spirit quarter, then even *they're* not sure what's in there."

"Uh," Sean said, trying to look self-assured.

"Look, I'm gonna level with you," Haruki said, "so you understand what you're asking. I'm only taking care of you because you don't stand a chance here without me. Now, I have to get home, and home is through that gate, and you can either come along with your eyes closed and your mouth shut and not say I didn't warn you, or you can wait until I send my brother to come get you, and spare yourself a lot of stress."

Sean wanted to ask what was through the gate, but he was afraid to. Besides, he suddenly knew exactly what he wanted. "Then take me home," he said. "Take me home now."

"No."

It took a moment before Sean understood what Haruki had said, and then he just repeated it, stupidly. "No."

"I'm sorry," Haruki said. "I really am. But I'm not going back to your world again. You'll have to find some other way. I'll help you if I can, but I'm not jumping back with you."

Sean stood still for just a moment with his mouth hanging open, his mind trying and failing to rip all the layers off what Haruki had said to get to some core, some essential middle that he could grasp on to. After a few seconds he said, "Where are we?"

Haruki sighed. "Look, can't we just get there first and then talk about this? I haven't been home in –"

"I don't *care*," Sean said, startling himself with the volume of his voice. He wasn't used to yelling at people with authority. He continued more softly, glancing at the animated crystal sculptures by the gate. "Just tell me, please. Where are we, and how do I get back to St Louis?"

Haruki squatted on the cobbled street, his wallet chain jangling. "I'm not doing this to spite you, man," he said. "I'm in way over my head too. How do you think I got the Jetless jump sequencing protocol? How do you think I felt when I realized that in order for their sequence to work I had to take..." He trailed off, looking at Sean with guilty eyes. His Pacific Northwest accent had dropped away, leaving something slightly birdlike in its place.

"Where *are* we?"

Haruki looked at the ground. "Look, I'm not sure. We're not on your planet, or anywhere in your space-time. That's all I've got." He closed his eyes and pinched the skin between them. "If I understood it I'd tell you. I don't even know quite how I got there, and I've spent the last three years trying to get back. Now I'm almost reunited with my family, if you'll just come with me. Can you let it rest for just half an hour till then? You'll get everything the fucking brochure

says: tea, bowing, raw fish, you name it. *Please*."

Sean stood for a moment in the middle of the street, waiting for the shaking in his legs to subside. "I'd better," he said, staring at the ground. Then he followed Haruki past the hundred beating hearts of the guards, and through the gates into the spirit quarter of someplace not quite Tokyo.

Sitting at home in front of the Travel Channel, Sean had dreamed of visiting far-flung corners of the globe, and often, when he'd half fallen asleep with the television still on, he'd dreamed of going farther still, to other planets, galaxies, to other universes entirely, where the laws of physics were different, where he'd see things he knew he couldn't even imagine seeing, from his post on the recliner. He'd imagined himself talking philosophy with aliens. He'd imagined... well, never this. In his dreams, he could always get back home.

Past the gate stood a world from a dream. Not a single one of the people they passed was human. One had the head of a fox; another, a snake's tail and feathered wings. The 'people' stood on the street talking and laughing, or walked arm in arm together, or sat around outdoor tables. Everywhere he looked was a sight he'd never seen before, a sight so strange his brain could not make sense of it. Everywhere a hundred foreign languages rang in his ears. The smells that assailed him were thick and strong, and evoked no memories.

He could barely keep up with Haruki, and a few times only his pink spiky hair in the distance led him along. Now that Haruki'd come clean, it seemed, he had completely given up his role of tour guide and was rushing home with abandon.

*Well, I'd do the same thing*, Sean thought, *if it were me*.

Would he?

Sean thought of what he had to go home to. The Travel Channel.

No, he reminded himself, he had friends, and a job he didn't hate, and once a year he got to see something extraordinary. That was more than a lot of people. And if he got home, he could tell people about this place. What if the jump could be used by everyone like Haruki had used it? A jolt of pure thrill went up Sean's spine at the thought. And he could be the one who brought the news to everyone, the messenger of a whole new era.

"Haruki, wait up!" he called.

But when he looked ahead, the splash of pink had vanished. Sean stopped in the middle of the cobbled street. A woman with a blue-scaled face jostled him from behind, hissed at him as she went by.

"Haruki, where are you?" No answer. "It's okay," he said. Haruki would be back for him.

But Haruki had not seemed terribly concerned with what happened to him. The world swam as Sean fought to calm himself; his stomach gripped itself in a vise. He ran forward down the crowded street, calling Haruki's name.

Then two things happened almost at once: A hand thick and rough as bark grabbed his wrist, and a man with a gazelle's head turned towards him from across the street, a concerned look on his face. "Help!" Sean said. He tugged at the hand, which was attached to the skinniest wrist he'd ever seen, and led to a branchlike arm leading to a tree's body. From among the leafy branches peered a gnarled face. "Help me!" Sean said, and the gazelle-man rushed over, waving his arms like a magician prestidigitating on stage.

The tree-man fell back as though struck in the face, leaving deep scratch marks on Sean's wrist, and Sean rushed over to the other man, almost crying with relief. But the gazelle grabbed him by the wrist as well, and lunged at his stomach with a syringe. Sean's relief fled and he jerked away, wrapping his arms around himself, cursing himself for a fool.

The features of the gazelle's face twisted with malice, and he app-



roached Sean, who was unharmed but nonetheless could not force himself to run: he was paralyzed with fear. The creature lunged toward him.

What happened next Sean saw with almost supernatural clarity. The tree-man clasped his gnarled hand over the gazelle's onrushing shoulder, and then there was no one in the street except Sean and the milling passersby, who pretended not to look at him and drifted off in every direction. Sean blinked his eyes several times, to make sure it was true, that they had really gone, then took off down the street as fast as he could go.

He headed for the gate. If he was stuck here, he would at least be stuck on his own terms, in the 'normal' part of the city, where he looked like everyone else and no one assaulted him on the street.

But Sean couldn't find the gate. Nothing looked familiar on the streets, and they turned and branched more and more as he went, up stairways and over bridges and through archways, until he had no idea whatsoever which way to go.

Finally, exhausted and terrified, he collapsed on a low wooden bench outside a building with the only familiar thing he'd seen in so long it hurt him to think that it might be another deception, like every other familiar-seeming thing he'd seen all day. It was a blue half-curtain, fluttering lightly over the doorway. In all his vids, that was the sign of a Tokyo bathhouse. Sean had wanted to visit a bathhouse more than almost anything else in Tokyo.

He could hardly remember, now, why he had wanted that. All of his reasons seemed brittle, like something from some other century. It had been because Sean was thinking of getting a tattoo, and he had heard that Yakuza used the bath, and wanted to see the tattoos rumored to be hidden beneath their clothes. He'd been both chilled and exhilarated at the idea of seeing the tattoos of a murderer.

Now, the thought left him cold. He didn't want any more thrills.

He should be looking for a place to spend the night. A hotel, an embassy, a goddamn bridge to sleep under. But he didn't really have hope that he'd be able to find any of those things. When he thought about the future his chest seized up till he couldn't breathe. Right here, right now, was some comfort. A blue curtain that might, just might, have a warm bath behind it, a place where he could think.

Sean stood and went inside.

An old woman stood behind a counter just inside. She *looked* human, although a black hooded robe covered most of her body. When she spoke she shattered the illusion. Like Haruki's, hers was a birdlike voice, high and nasal, only unlike Haruki she spoke in a language that matched the voice. Sean couldn't understand a word of it, but when the woman held out her hand he peeled a bill at random off a wad of crumpled yen and pressed it to her palm. She grunted, and he walked by her without waiting for her to notice that the money was, if his guess was correct, not quite right.

There were no Yakuza in the bath. Actually, there was no one there except him, and he settled back in the hot water and closed his eyes, imagining how wonderful it would be to have baths like this in St Louis. At the thought, tears gathered in his eyes; he wiped them away with the back of his hand as quickly as he could. He didn't want to think like that. He was going home; if he let himself doubt it for a moment he wasn't sure he would be able to do what he needed to do to make it there. Whatever that might be.

Something slimy wrapped around his leg.

Sean jerked upright and tried to pull his leg away, but whatever it was down there only wrapped itself tighter. His leg began to tingle where it touched.

Sean struggled, turned to grip the edge of the pool. His leg felt like it was being squeezed into two pieces. Whatever it was kept pulling

him away from the wall, towards the center of the pool. Something long and black, reaching to a black mass in the bottom of the pool that Sean was sure hadn't been there before.

The tingling grew to a weakness in his whole body. The pool got deeper and deeper. Sean stood up on his free leg to keep his head above water. "Help!" he screamed. "Someone help me!"

But no one came.

Sean couldn't keep his head up any longer. He gulped one final deep breath, and then the water closed over his head. He reached his hands down and tried to pry the tentacle off his leg, but it just kept getting tighter and tighter.

Blackness closed in at the edges of his vision. He was numb all over. Desperate for air, he reached his arms towards the surface. But the surface was a thousand miles away, the overhead lights of the room above tiny points of light dwindling as he watched.

Someone grabbed his hand. A firm, warm grip. And a face appeared above him, the face of an old bearded man, who reached down towards him, smiling. The old man gripped his elbow with his other hand, then released his hand and pulled himself downwards to hook Sean under the arm. He climbed down Sean like a ladder, fast and sure. When his waist came level with Sean's face he realized the man had the tail of a fish.

The tentacle around his leg loosened, and Sean clawed his way to the surface. In a fit of pure adrenaline he hauled himself over the pool's edge and lay gasping on the tiles. His body burned intolerably, and when he tried to stand his arms and legs only flopped uselessly around him.

The woman from the front counter was nowhere to be seen.

"Help," he said. He knew something was horribly wrong with his body. He bent his head to look at his leg, and stared unbelieving at the purple and black wound festering there. He waited for the old man to come back to help him, or the woman from the front to realize something was wrong, but the room remained silent but for the water lapping at the tile.

After a long time Sean began to realize no one was going to save him. Where he came from, he was never more than a wall away from others, at work or at home. If he called for help, help would come. A ridiculous fury rose up in him, directed at Haruki, who had used him and then abandoned him to die. But Sean was not going to die. He was not. He gathered all his strength and raised himself to all fours.

He made it one moment at a time, past the pool, which was red with blood and empty of both monster and fish-tailed old man, and past the changing rooms. At the entrance, the old woman stared at him from behind her counter. She watched as he pulled himself foot by foot across the floor, underneath the blue curtain, and into the street.

The city lit up with lanterns and neon as dusk approached. Sean wasn't sure, but he didn't think he'd made it more than two or three blocks, and now he lay, face up in the street, unable to move. He was having trouble breathing, and his awareness of his limbs had faded to a dull throbbing sensation. When a face carved of wood peered into his own, he had difficulty feeling the fear he thought he should feel.

"Go away," he gasped, his words incomprehensible to his own ears. But to his surprise the tree-man's fingers stopped an inch from his face, and receded from view.

With his head turned to the side Sean could see the tree-man squatting in the street near him. He couldn't tell if it was the same one who had grabbed him in the street earlier. A deep frown creased its ageless face.



It reached into a furrow in its chest and pulled out something. Something small and flat, like an antique laser pointer. He pointed it at Sean's head, and Sean could only watch as a thin red line shot towards him and hit the cobbles beside his face.

Where it hit, the street smoked, and a horrible, acrid smell hit Sean a moment later. He closed his eyes. But the laser never touched him, and after a while the sizzle of the street beside his head died away, and the burned scent faded from his nostrils. He lay there and forced his lungs to take air, in, out, in, out, in, out. He could no longer open his eyes, to check if the tree-man was still there, but the deep silence all around him told him it had gone. Sean knew he was still in the middle of the street, vulnerable, but nothing he said to his body could make it move one centimeter more.

Someone kicked Sean in the head, and not gently. He opened his eyes – he was lying in the middle of the street, his body cold and aching. He jumped up, turned full circle to fend off his attacker or kidnapper or thief or whatever the hell, but he was all alone. The street stood empty in the blue pre-dawn light.

It took him a moment to realize that his leg didn't hurt. He pulled up his kimono – pink new skin stretched up his entire leg from ankle to thigh. Had the tree-man done that? Where did he go? Another blow struck Sean in the head, harder this time. He looked around wildly for his attacker, but there was no one else there besides him. He threw his arms up over his face.

"Knock it off," he said. The next time it nearly knocked him to the ground. "*Stop*," Sean said. He briefly considered calling for help, then remembered how much good that had done him the last time. He reached for his money belt – maybe there was someone there he couldn't see, and he could appease them.

The belt was gone. And the next blow drove Sean to his knees. He groped around in the air and his hand fell on something, some spot where the air was thicker and colder. He drove his fist into it with all his strength.

There was a sound like a hundred windows shattering, and Sean covered his head again for the rain of shards that didn't come.

After a long while Sean realized it was gone, and nothing else was coming to hurt him. Morning light shone between the shops and temples. His stomach growled fiercely. It felt like he hadn't eaten in days. Sean reached for his money again before he remembered, then checked again, just to be sure.

It was gone. It was all gone. Passport, letter of authenticity from Jumpless, his money, his car keys, his picture of his cat – all gone. Sean felt his chest seize up again. What was he going to do without – without what? His car keys? Was he ever going to need those again? He only felt upset about the money. It had seemed to work for the bathhouse lady. Or had it? Maybe black-tentacled monsters were reserved for people with bad cash. Thinking about that, Sean felt his heart start racing, and he quickly turned his mind away. He needed to concentrate on one thing at a time. First, food. He looked up the street. Wisps of blue like detached pieces of sky floated towards him, undulating slowly. He stepped to the side to let them pass. He edged his way warily up the street, stepping over a small stream that very clearly flowed uphill down the center of the street and had not been there the night before. Ahead of him a blue half-curtain fluttered in the morning breeze. Sean turned and went the other direction.

Sean found where the beggars gathered. They lined the street, holding out their bowls in silence, and everyone who passed dropped a single grain of rice inside. Sean didn't know how he could live on a few grains of rice, but he was so hungry he didn't care. He stood

at the end of the line of beggars and held out his hands, trembling with anticipation. Nobody gave him anything.

Sean traded his hair for a mask to hide his human features. It was a fierce mask, a fox with sharp teeth and eyes that lit up green from time to time – he hadn't yet figured out why or how. With it on he felt like a new man, a man who was crafty and capable – a man who could get things done. He spent the rest of the day searching for the gate. He found a high stone wall and tried to follow it, but always it seemed to recede before him, or else the twisted streets led him off, always just away from where he thought he was going. He tried to ask the way, but no one spoke English. He wasn't even sure they spoke Japanese. Every person he talked to answered in incomprehensible gibberish if they answered at all.

At the end of the day he stood on the street corner, close to tears. His kimono was stained with dirt and grease and something that looked like blue jell-o that Sean was afraid to touch. His stomach felt like it was turning in on itself. He was exhausted, starving, and in pain, but worst of all, he was lonely. He felt like if he could just *talk* to one person, everything would be alright. Even that bastard Haruki. He trudged up a hill past a group of people staring at a television in a shop window. Sean paused to see what the big deal was, but it was just some multicolored static.

At the top of the hill was a bench overlooking the city. Sean eyed it warily, and sure enough, very soon it folded itself up neatly and dug itself into the ground until only a hole and a pile of dirt remained. Sean decided he preferred to stand.

Night was falling. A deep pink the color of Haruki's hair stained the sky, and the clouds turned red and orange and gold. In the distance a long chain of mountains spread out from horizon to horizon. One of them moved in a stately march past the others. Sean rubbed his eyes and looked again. The mountain continued on, graceful, beautiful, utterly bizarre and utterly perfect. Sean breathed in, the scent of pine and smoke identifiable among the foreign scents on the air. He leaned down and plucked a blade of grass at his feet, put it in his mouth and chewed it. It tasted a lot better than grass at home. He ate quite a lot of it, then lay down on the ground and slept. He didn't sleep very well – he kept dreaming that bench-shaped monsters came out of the ground to sniff at his clothes and bald scalp. But he made it through the night.

Sean stood in a bustling market with bright stalls lining both sides of the street and colored banners waving. He scanned the crowd for a head of pink, spiky hair, but he didn't really expect to see it, and he wasn't disappointed. In the nearest stall a man with a fish's head sold grimy keyboards that looked like something from the 1980s. In the stall beside that a small boy with his liquid silver hair dripping down his shoulders plied voice activated kinetic interfaces, like the kind that Sean had given up purchasing in order to afford this trip. Sean noticed that both stalls had an equal amount of customers lined up before them.

He reached under the sash of his kimono and pulled out a handful of grass, reached under his mask and put it in his mouth. Now that he wasn't ravenous it didn't taste so good, but it was the only food he had and all that he was likely to get for a good long while. He had nothing left to trade. *Your clothes*, a snide voice in his head said. *That ridiculous mask you think protects you*. Sean started as he realized that, if time flowed the same way here as it did at home, it was Monday morning. He was late for work.

A sharp tug on his sleeve made him look down. Near his knees, a group of grape-sized people sat squeezed together on a floating



piece of cloth like a miniature flying carpet. They held, between them, a large gold coin. They pointed at his sash.

Sean reached under it and pulled out a handful of wilting grass blades. The carpet swept upwards, and the foremost man, who wore a tiny pair of high-tech interface goggles over his jet black hair, reached out for them. The rest of the people shoved the coin into Sean's hand, and then the whole group flew off behind a lumbering mound of fur from which a pair of red eyes shone. A few stray blades of grass fluttered to the ground.

Sean looked for the gate all that day. And the next, and the next, but eventually he gave up. He'd thought that maybe, just maybe, even if he couldn't get back to *his* St Louis, he could get back to the St Louis of this world. That wouldn't be so bad, would it? But as much as he walked and searched and asked directions from people, animals, and inanimate objects, he remained in the spirit quarter. He discovered a good trick, though – lots of people would pay money for that grass he'd eaten. Why they didn't just walk up the hill and pick it themselves for free, he couldn't imagine. But in fact, anything that Sean picked up off the ground and handed to the nearest passerby would most often get him at least a handful of coins, and sometimes some paper money, although the question of which had the larger value continued to elude him. It got him food, though, and he even found a family of ghostly badgers living above a scuba gear shop that gave him a pallet in the corner at night, near the solar heating panel, in return for some money and a single thread from his frayed kimono.

Then Sean saw the bark-man again, and figured out how he'd disappeared, not once, but twice, without a trace: he had jumped. Sean watched him do it. Watched him reach into his chest and pull out a piece of twisted up wire, then vanish. Sean didn't wait until he could find him again; he bought himself a ball of copper wire, and he set to work, bending it, shaping it, coiling and uncoiling it in endless permutations, all the while focusing on the Jetless jump room, the one place he could make himself believe he could get to if he wanted it bad enough.

Of course it didn't work. He broke about a hundred strands of wire, tried standing right where he'd seen the tree-man disappear, even said "Abracadabra" under his breath; the wire remained, not a magical conduit, but a wire, and Sean remained a *gaijin* in a fox mask. Finally he threw the wire in a gutter.

But then he saw someone else do it, too. A woman in a white robe – he could see the far side of the street through her, the polished mirrors of a gleaming temple, and he might have believed she simply vanished like a ghost, but for the wire. It, like the mirrors, gleamed silver in the sunlight as she twisted it into a shape like a geometric flower with concentric petals. Sean had to search for days before he found someone to sell some to him, and it cost him all the money he had.

Sean stood outside the shop where he bought it, trying to faithfully replicate the shape the woman had made. The wire was sharp – it cut his hands – and it resisted every turn he gave it, finding shapes of its own, the wrong shapes, and making Sean redo every twist twice, three times, or more. For days it looked like he'd wadded it up and slept on it instead of tried to form it into something. Then one afternoon he suddenly wasn't standing outside a sushi restaurant anymore, but high on his favorite hill, with the wind blowing and all the mountains on the horizon floating two thousand feet above the foothills. He dropped the wire and screamed.

Then he picked it up and looked at the shape he'd made. It wasn't exactly what he remembered. He straightened the wire, sort of,

then reformed it to the same shape. Nothing happened. He walked back to the sushi place and started up again.

Soon Sean could jump to the hill consistently, or to the badgers' house, although they didn't like it at all, and refused him lodging for two nights because of it; or even, if the wind was blowing the right direction, to the inside of a temple to a fierce demon. That last one, Sean tried to avoid. He wasn't quite sure how the jumps worked; it was something to do with bending wire, but also something to do with mood and intention and weather and probably whether or not the atoms of his hair were properly aligned, for all he knew. Still, he kept practising, because he knew if he could jump one kilometer, he could jump farther. Maybe all the way back to St Louis.

And one day he did.

He'd been standing on the hill again, watching to see what the mountains would do, absently coiling wire, when suddenly he was at Jetless travel agency, the St Louis Arch gleaming in the sunlight of the poster above the front desk. A young man in a silver suit, clipboard in hand, stood gaping at him beside a little old lady in a grass skirt. When the man pulled a gun Sean bent the wire, by pure habit and adrenaline, in a frantic loop and found himself back where he started, heart pounding like twenty hearts in his chest.

Sean knew right away he'd jumped to the wrong St Louis. The Arch had been bright blue, and he was pretty sure the little old lady had sported a tiny pair of horns poking through her scarf-covered perm. He'd never considered that there might be more than two St Louis's, his own and maybe one on this world, if he could ever reach it. The thought that there might be hundreds, thousands, exploded inside his mind like a bomb, leaving shrapnel everywhere. But when the smoke cleared, Sean was still standing on the hill, looking out over the golden afternoon sun shining on the spirit quarter of the only Tokyo he knew. He was on the brink of something amazing. He felt it deep inside like he'd never felt anything else before.

Sean stood on the jump ramp he had built – on his hill, which he had never bought but which no one ever told him not to work on – the entire spirit quarter of Tokyo spread out before him. Its arches and temples gleamed in the morning light. Its alleys hung deep in shadow. Beside him a kid with yellow feathers covering his entire body looked doubtfully at the apparatus.

"You sure this'll work?" he asked in Tokyo standard.

"Positive," said Sean. "I've done it a hundred times. All you have to do is run down the ramp and through the arch. I'll take care of the rest."

The kid walked down to where the ramp ended and looked over. Sean smiled to himself. Six feet below the ramp was a wide ledge. There was no chance of falling; the ramp and the overlook were for dramatic effect. People needed to feel they were taking a risk, or the jump was anticlimactic.

"Okay, Mr Anamurti, it's time. We've a narrow window to Shar-shar-balleae, and if we miss it the next one's not for three weeks." In Shar-shar-balleae, feathers were considered a sign of sexual prowess. Minoru Anamurti would enjoy his trip.

Minoru walked over and joined Sean at the top of the ramp. Sean took his wire and formed the appropriate symbol, a square sprouting concentric loops and radiating meridian lines. He smiled at his work. Sean Randall, more often known simply as Fox, was the best jump master in Tokyo. All his customers went away satisfied. ☼

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Jennifer is an occasional superhero, an ex marine botanist, and a bicycle adventurer who lives in Eugene, Oregon with assorted housemates including a husband and a cat named after a windstorm.



The study was lodged high beneath the eaves of the house, and it was imbued with traces of him. It had not changed much in the twenty years since she was last there – it was more untidy, a mess of papers and books, standing on, lying beside, heaped below the two tables and a desk. It was almost impossible to walk across the floor without stepping on his work. The room was otherwise much as she remembered it. The window was still uncurtained, the walls unseeable behind the crowded bookcases. His narrow divan bed stood in one corner, now bare of everything except the mattress, although she had never forgotten the tangle of blankets she had left behind when she was here before.

The intimacy of the room was a shock to her. For so long his study had been a memory, a hidden joyful secret, but now it had become tragic, bereft of him. She could detect the scent of his clothes, his books, his leather document case, the old frayed carpet. His presence could be felt in every darkened corner, in the two squares of bright sunlight on the floor, in the dust on the bookshelves and on the volumes that stood there in untidy leaning lines, in the sticky ochre grime on the window panes, the yellowed papers, the dried careless spills of ink.

She gulped in the air he had breathed, paralysed by sudden grief. It was incomprehensibly more intense than the shock she had felt on receiving the news of his illness, his imminent death. She knew she was rocking to and fro, her back muscles rigid beneath the stiff fabric of her black dress. She was dazed by the loss of him.

Trying to break out of the grief she went to his oaken lectern, where he had always stood to write, his tall shape leaning in an idiosyncratic way as his right hand scraped the pen across the sheets of his writing pad. There was a famous portrait of him in that stance – it had been painted before she met him, but it captured the essence of him so well that she had later bought a small reproduction of it.

Where his left hand habitually rested on the side, the invariable black-papered cheroot smouldering between his curled knuckles, was a darker patch, a stain of old perspiration on the polish. She ran her fingertips across the wooden surface, recalling a particular half-hour of that precious day, when he had turned his back on her while he stood at this lectern, absorbed suddenly by a thought.

That memory of him had haunted her as she set out on her desperate quest to reach him before he died. The family had delayed too long in telling her of the illness, perhaps by choice – a second message she received *en route*, while waiting on an island, had broken the final news to her. She had travelled across a huge segment of the Dream Archipelago with the unchanging mental image of his long back, his inclined head, his intent eyes, the quiet sound of his pen and the tobacco smoke curling around his hair.

Downstairs the mourners were gathering, awaiting the summons to the church.

She had arrived later than most of the others, after four anxious days of hurriedly arranged travel to this island of Piqay. It was so long since she had made the journey across the Archipelago. She had forgotten how many ports of call there were on the way, how many lengthy delays could be caused by other passengers, by the loading and unloading of cargo. At first the islands charmed her again with their variety of colours, terrains and moods. Their names had memories for her from her last journey, all those years ago: Lillen-cay, Ia, Junno, Olldus Precipitus, but they were reminders of breathless anticipation on the voyage out or of quiet thoughts on the journey home, not actual recollections of events or experiences ashore.

The remembered charm soon faded. After the first day on the ship the islands simply seemed to be in her way. The boat sailed slowly across the calm straits between islands. Sometimes she stood at the rail, watching the arrowing wake spreading out from the sides of the vessel, but it soon came to be an illusion of movement. Whenever she looked up from the white churning wake, whichever island they happened to be passing still seemed to be in exactly the same relative position as before, across the narrows. Only the seabirds moved, soaring and diving around the superstructure, and at the stern, but even they went nowhere that the ship did not.

At the port on Junno she left the ship, trying to see if there was a quicker passage available.

Chris began writing soon after leaving school and has been a full-time freelance writer since 1968. He has published eleven novels, three short-story collections and a number of other books, including critical works, biographies, novelizations and children's non-fiction. His most recent novel *The Separation* won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the BSFA Award. In 1996 he won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *The Prestige* (filmed in 2006). His latest projects are a book about the making of *The Prestige*, and a collection of short stories. Another collection, a revised version of *The Dream Archipelago* (to include 'The Trace of Him' and another previously uncollected story) is in preparation. More info on [christopher-priest.co.uk](http://christopher-priest.co.uk)

# CHRISTOPHER PRIEST



# THE TRACE OF HIM

After an hour of frustrated enquiries in the harbour offices she returned to the ship on which she had arrived, where the protracted unloading of timber was still going on. The next day, on Muriseay, she managed to find a flight with a private aero club: it was only a short hop by air but it saved visits to the ports of three intervening islands. Afterwards, most of the time she saved had slipped away, while she was forced to wait for the next ferry.

At last she arrived on Piqay, but according to the schedule of funeral arrangements that arrived with the news of his death, there was only an hour to spare. To her surprise, the family had arranged for a car to meet her at the quay. A man in a dark suit stood by the harbour entrance, holding a large white card with her name written in capitals. As the driver steered the car swiftly away from Piqay Port and headed into the shallow hills surrounding the town and its estuary, she felt the commonplace anxieties of travel slipping away, to be replaced at last by the complex of emotions that had been kept at a distance while she fretted on ships.

Now they returned to her in force. Fear of the family she had never met. Apprehension about what they might have been told about her, or what they might not. Worse, what they intended for her now, the lover whose existence might undermine his reputation, were she to become known to the public. The bottomless grief still sucking her down as it had done from the moment she heard the news about his illness, then latterly his death. Defiant pride in the past. The untouchable sense of loneliness, of being left only with memories. The hopes, the endless hopes that something might yet live for her. And the confusion about why the family had sent the messages to her. Were they motivated by concern for her, by spite at her, or by just the dutiful acts of a bereaved family? Or perhaps, and this was what she clasped to herself, he had remembered her and had made the request himself?

But above all these, that endless grief, the loss, the feeling of final abandonment. Those twenty years without him, holding on to an inexpressible hope, and now the rest of the years to come, finally, absolutely without him.

The driver said nothing. He drove efficiently. After her four days aboard ships, with engines and generators constantly running, the bulkheads vibrating, the car's engine felt smooth and almost silent. She looked out of the dark-tinted window by her side, staring at the vineyards as the car speeded along the lanes, glancing at the pastures, at the rocky defiles in the distance, at the patches of bare sandy soil by the roadside. She must have seen these the last time, but she had no memory of them. That visit was a blur of impressions, but at the centre were the few hours she had spent alone with him, brilliant and clear, defined forever.

She thought only of him, that time. That one time.

Then, the house. A huge crowd at the gates, pushing aside to make a way for her car. People stared curiously. One woman waved, leaning forward to try to see her. The gates opened to an electronic signal from the dashboard of the car. They closed behind, as the car moved at a more stately pace up the drive. Mature trees in the park, mountains behind, glimpses of the cerulean sea and dark islands, far away. Her eyes remained dry, but she found it painful to look around at a view she had once thought she would never forget.

On arrival she stood silently with the other mourners, knowing no one, feeling their silent disdain. Her suitcase stood on the floor outside the room. She moved away from the cluster of people and went to an inner door, from which she could see across the main hall towards the wide staircase.

An elderly man detached himself from the group and followed her. He glanced up the stairs.

"We know who you are, of course," he said, his voice unsteady. His eyelids fluttered with apparent distaste, and he never looked directly at her. She was struck by a facial similarity. Surely not old enough to be his father? There was a brother, probably the right sort of age, but he had said they were alienated. Years ago. "He left clear instructions for us to pass on to you," the man said. "You are free to go up to his room if you wish, but you must not remove anything."

So she had made her escape, went quietly and alone up the staircase to this room beneath the eaves. But now she was trembling.





A faint blue haze remained drifting in the room, a vestige of his life. This room must have been empty for several days, yet the light mist of the air he had breathed remained.

With a sudden flowing of renewed unhappiness, she remembered the only time she had lain with him, curled up naked on the bed beside him, glowing with excitement and contentment, while he sucked in the acrid smoke of the cheroots and exhaled it in a thin swirling cone of blueness. That was the same bed, the one in the corner, the narrow cot with the bare mattress. She dared not go near it now.

Five of the cheroots, probably the last ones he ever bought, lay in an untidy scrambled pile on a corner of one of the tables. There was no sign of a packet. She picked one up, slid it beneath her nostrils, sensing the fragrance of the tobacco and thinking about the time she had shared one with him, relishing the dampness of his saliva transferred to her lips. A delirious exhilaration moved through her, and for a moment her eyes lost focus on the details of the room.

He had never travelled away from the island during his lifetime, even after the prizes and honours began to be bestowed. While she lay naked in his arms, exulting inwardly over the touch of his fingers as they rested on her breast, he tried to explain his attachment to Piqay, why he could never leave to be with her. It was an island of traces, he said, shadows that followed you, a psychic spoor that you left behind if you departed the island, but if you did you would become diffuse in some way that he could not explain. He would never be able to return, he said. He dared not try, because to do so might mean he would lose the trace that defined him to Piqay. For him, the urgency to leave was less powerful than the urgency of staying. She, feeling a different and less mystical urge, quietened him by caressing him, and soon they were making love again.

She would never forget that one day they had spent alone together, but afterwards, in the years of silence that followed, she had never been sure if he even remembered her.

Too late she had had the answer, when the messages arrived. Twenty years, four days.

She heard large cars moving slowly on the gravel drive outside the house, and one by one their engines cut out.

The blue haze was thicker now. She turned away from the lectern, aroused by her memories, but despairing because memories were all they could ever be. As she looked away from the dazzle of the window it seemed to her that the blue air was denser in the centre of the room. It had substance, texture.

She moved her face towards it, her lips puckering. The haze swirled about her, and she darted her face to and fro, trying to detect some response from it. Streaks in the old residue of smoke, denser patches, coalesced before her eyes. She stepped back to see them better, then forward again to press her face against them. Smoke stung against her eyes, and tears welled up.

The swirls took shape before her, making a ghostly impression of his face. It was the face as she remembered it from two decades before, not the one the public knew, the famous grizzled countenance of the great man. No time had passed for her, nor for the trace he had left. There were no features painted in the smoke, just the shape of his head and face moulded in the blue, like a mask, but intimately detailed. Lips, hair, eyes, all had their shapes, contoured by the smoke.

Her breath halted momentarily. Panic and adoration seized her.

His head was tilted slightly to one side, his eyes were half closed, his lips were apart. She leaned forward to take her kiss, felt the light pressure of the smoky lips, the brush of ghostly eyelashes. It lasted only an instant.

His face, his mask, contorted in the air, jolting back and away from

her. The eye shapes clenched tightly. The mouth opened. The lines of smoke that formed his forehead became furrowed. He jerked his head back again, then lunged in a spasm of deep coughing, rocking backwards and forwards in agony, hacking for breath, painfully trying to clear whatever obstructed him below.

A spray of bright redness burst out from the shape that was his open mouth, droplets of scarlet smoke, a fine aerosol. She stepped back to avoid it, and the kiss was lost forever.

The apparition was wheezing, making dry hacking coughs, small ones now, weak and unhoping, the end of the attack. He was staring straight at her, terrified, full of pain and unspeakable loss, but already the smoke was untangling, dispersing.

The red droplets had fallen to the floor and formed a pool on one of his discarded sheets of paper. She knelt down to look more closely, and trailed her fingertips through the sticky mess. When she stood again, her fingers carried a smear of the blood, but now the air in the study had cleared. The blue haze had gone at last. The final traces of him had vanished. The dust, the sunlight, the books, the dark corners remained.

She fled.

Downstairs she stood once again with the others, waiting in the great hall to be allocated to one of the cars. Until her name was spoken by one of the undertaker's staff, no one acted as if they knew who she was or acknowledged her in any way. Even the man who had spoken to her stood with his back against her. The family and the other mourners spoke quietly to each other, clearly daunted by the seriousness of the occasion, by the thought of the crowds waiting in the road at the end of the long drive, by the passing of this man.

She was given a seat in the last of the cars, bringing up the rear of the cortège. She was pressed against the window by the large bodies of two serious and unspeaking adolescents.

In the crowded church she sat alone to one side, steadying herself by staring at the flagstone floor, the ancient wooden pews. She stood for the hymns and prayers but only mouthed the words silently, remembering what he had said were his feelings about churches. The tributes to him were formal, grand, spoken sincerely by illustrious men and women. She listened closely, recognizing nothing of him in their words. He had not sought this renown, this greatness.

In the churchyard on a hill overlooking the sea, standing near the grave, back from the main group of mourners, hearing the words of committal distorted by the breeze, she was again alone. She thought about the first book of his she had ever read, while still at college. Everyone knew his work now, but at that time he was unknown and it had been a personal discovery.

The persistent wind from the islands buffeted against her, pressing her clothes against her body on one side, sending strands of hair across her eyes. She smelt the salt from the sea, the promise of distance, departure, escape from this place.

Members of the public and the cameras of the media were only just visible, kept in the distance beyond a cordon of flowers and a patrol of policemen. In a lull of the wind she heard the familiar words of the committal uttered by the priest, and saw the coffin being lowered into the ground. The sun continued to shine but she could not stop shivering. She thought only of him, the caress of his fingertips, the light pressure of his lips, his gentle words, his tears when she went away at the end. The long years without him, holding on to everything she knew of him. She barely dared to breathe for fear of expelling him from her thoughts.

She held her hand out of sight beneath the small bag she carried. The blood had congealed on her fingers, cold, an encrustation, eternal, the final trace of him. ❧



**The James White Award** is a short story competition open to non-professional writers and is decided by an international panel of judges made up of professional authors and editors. Previous winners have gone on to either win other awards or get published regularly, which is exactly why the award was set up.

The winning story each year receives a cash prize, a handsome trophy and publication in *Interzone*. Entries are received from all over the world, and a shortlist is drawn up for the judges. The judges for the most recent award included Kelly Link, Alastair Reynolds and Michael Carroll, who chose as winner 'The Faces of My Friends' by Jennifer Harwood-Smith.

The James White Award was instituted to honour the memory of one of Ireland's most successful science fiction authors, James White. To learn more about James White and his writing please visit [SectorGeneral.com](http://SectorGeneral.com). To learn more about the Award itself visit [jameswhiteaward.com](http://jameswhiteaward.com).

— James Bacon, Award Administrator



## Winner of the James White Award

# The Faces of My Friends by Jennifer Harwood-Smith

### Tuesday, March 4th

Yesterday, Shelby was stoned and I had to watch it. He'd sneezed and reached up his hand to cover his mouth, muffle the sound. Old habits and all that. That was when his sleeve slipped down and they saw the tattoos. He did them in regular ink from whatever pens he could scrounge. They only ever lasted a few days, at most. Shelby called them 'the shifting art of time'. He loved them, loved doing them, and wouldn't let any of us draw them. He said their beauty was in their impermanence. The trick was when we saw a group of shapes and then we'd think *Wow, Shelby had a tattoo that looked just like that*. I liked that about Shelby.

But they spotted the tattoos and stoned Shelby. I had to watch and afterwards two of them came over to me and just stood there, staring at me. After a few seconds one of them spat on the hem of my cloak and said, "Well? Don't you want to say anything to us? Anything at all?"

I said nothing. If I'd so much as moved they'd have had the right to kill me. They got bored after a minute or so and they went away. When everyone was gone, even the children who'd thrown pebbles, I went to where Shelby lay. The long black cloak covered his body completely, though his facemask had been pushed aside. There were more tattoos covering his face, which I'd never seen before. The sensors on the masks trigger if we ever remove them in company, and only deactivate once we're dead. It had also made it unnecessary for him to try to cover his mouth. Shelby was very handsome, and the tattoos – permanent ones, I could tell – made him stunningly beautiful. I wanted to take a picture of his face, but I had no camera. Ten years ago I'd have had one, but never even think of using it for something like this. Now I itched for the heavy feel of that equipment – forbidden to our kind – to let me record

my friend's final expression. Instead I sat there for long minutes, staring and committing every detail to my memory; his long eyelashes, his thick eyebrows, the peak of his thin lips, his defined, almost chiselled cheeks and chin. I'll never know what colour his eyes were, because they were shut and I couldn't bear to touch him, to feel death where Shelby had been, but he was beautiful indeed, every tattoo designed to both enhance his own features and to be a statement in themselves. And Shelby was dead.

I didn't stay long, but left quickly, knowing he'd be found and buried where people like us are always buried. On the way home, three women spat on me and a child hit me with a stick, running after me until he got bored of it. I almost hope he turns out to be one of us. It would serve the little bastard right.

When I got in, I found a bit of chalk I'd stolen a long time ago from a school that I was cleaning and went down into the cellar. I went to the bit behind the wall that very few could get into – and really only those with some imagination – and held the candle up to the wall and drew Shelby's face. No one will ever find it, even during the raids. I know they might find these pages, but when the book is filled I think I'll put it into a pot of water and boil it.

I felt the force in my mind battling to get out, to tell the world what happened, what is happening, and still I couldn't let it out, because I was too afraid, and all I could do was curl up in a corner and cry quietly and try not to screech out Shelby's name. I couldn't even write this yesterday. I can barely write it now. Shelby, I miss you, and I love you. You were my friend. I hope you're in a better place now, making tattoos.

### Thursday, March 6th

There was no funeral for Shelby, but those of us that are left, those



who stayed in the open as the winds of opinion changed for the worse, met yesterday morning. We had to do it in a canteen, but we managed to organise another meeting for midnight. When I got there, Hastings, Darwin and Gillespie were all in attendance. Fitzgerald arrived with a few bottles of wine. I have no idea where she found them, but there they were, seeming to turn an entire decade into fiction. Gillespie couldn't have any because she has to donate a lung in a few days and they're testing her blood daily. She says they think she's going to take drugs to prevent them taking her lung against her will. She might too, but she doesn't want them to harvest the rest of her organs as punishment. She has beautiful skin, and knows that they're just dying to get their hands on it before she gets older and it gets wrinkled and thin and useless. Her nails used to be painted wild colours in the past, I remember, though her face is lost to me now. But I do know that she had such incredible *style*. I always wondered how she was so calm about having to wear the cloak.

The wine wasn't good at all, but it still tasted to me like a gift from a kinder God. We toasted and remembered Shelby. We tried to remember what he'd been before, and we think it was a painter, but we're not sure. How come we don't know what Shelby did before? Do I even know what *I* did before? It was all so long ago, before the black cloaks and the facemasks and the jeering faces in the street, that I can't even remember. I can't remember what it felt like to walk under the sun with my open face turned up to the warmth and the light. I wondered if the others did; our group used to speak so much about freedom and our own expression, in the old days. But I didn't say any of that, and we agreed that we thought Shelby was a painter, and that was all there was to it.

Then we got drunk and words like 'organising' and 'committees' started to appear in our conversation, even though we knew they were a waste of breath. People like us don't have a voice any more. We may have had, once, but it slipped away from us and we watched it go. We were so stupid.

Then we got really drunk, and I described what Shelby's face looked like. I sketched it in the sand at our feet, and everyone took a look. They were all very impressed by how beautiful he was. I wonder if I ever saw any of their faces before the facemasks and the cloaks. If I did, I don't remember any more. Gillespie fell asleep, probably tired because of having to go through tests every day, and the rest of us started talking about doing something as a memorial to Shelby. Hastings had composed a poem, and recited it, and we all liked it. We agreed that it suited Shelby. Darwin sang a tune off the top of his head and we agreed it was very fine as well. Fitzgerald said she wanted to paint Shelby. Then I, very drunk, suggested that we paint Shelby on a wall, where everyone had to see, where they'd be forced to look at what they'd done to him.

We were very drunk, so we decided to do it. We left Gillespie sleeping and took chalks in five colours and went out into the street. It was very dark and we found a street the patrols hardly ever walk down, because no one like us lives there and there's no danger there. And we spent an hour together, painting Shelby's face on the wall, at least six foot high, if not more, and we got him just right, even though we didn't have enough chalk to shade him in properly. We even got in the slightly confused look he'd been wearing when I'd seen him. Then we all stepped back and looked at Shelby's face. I started to cry and the others shushed me, just sober enough to realise that we would be in very serious trouble if someone woke up and we were caught. So instead of screaming out the question, I took the green chalk and went up to the wall and under Shelby's dead face I wrote three letters: *WHY*.

That's when we left. It was only about five hours ago, and I just realised what we did, and the sun is up, so I can't go back and get rid of it, and I feel sick to my stomach. What's going to happen to us?

### **Monday, March 10th**

There were angry editorials, but there wasn't enough evidence to charge any of the four of us, though I did get three more raids than I'd have expected.

Gillespie went in to have her lung removed, and they say they made a mistake, took out her heart instead, so Gillespie's organs, including her beautiful skin, are being put into other people. I hope her body parts infect them with what we all are. I hope their children are born like us. I wish she'd tattooed herself. I wish she'd made herself sick. I wish she'd made herself a leper, so they'd never have touched her body and harvested everything out of her just because they wanted to and they could. There's no one who can stand up for Gillespie and now she's dead, another of my friends is dead and I never once saw her face. They took her face from my memory and then took her from us and I hate them, I hate them, I hate them! I hope they all die!

### **Tuesday, March 18th**

Fitzgerald's gone missing. She was doing laundry service and now she's gone. I checked at the hospital, at the organ clinic, and they said she wasn't there, but I think they could be lying. They started looking at me, like a hungry man looks at a piece of uncooked meat, like they could make something of me, and I left really quickly, without giving my name. I told Hastings and Darwin that I can't go back there again, and they agreed, but how will we find out where Fitzgerald is? There's no one we can go to who won't laugh at us, or who will care. They've been getting rid of us for years; one more is just a step in the right direction. They call us subversive.

I went to the laundry district and walked around for a while, but then the strap of my sandal broke. I had to take it off and limp into an alley and hide there until night fell and I could walk home with the broken sandal making noise in the street. I was terrified, stopping at every noise in case someone had heard me. The rules say our group can't make a sound in public without punishment. Even a child could kill me if they heard me. When I got home I crawled under my bed and cried all night long. I drew pictures in the dust under the bed, and wiped them out with my hand, crying even more every time I thought of Fitzgerald.

### **Friday, March 21st**

They found Fitzgerald's body. It was lying in a gutter. I can't write what was done to her. Some people came in my home, dragged me out there and forced me to look at her where she was. I couldn't make a sound, couldn't scream at them to cover her up, didn't they have any decency, couldn't they cover her up? Some woman screamed at me that this was what we all deserved. Why did Fitzgerald deserve that? Oh God, why did she deserve that? She was so good to everyone, never complained, even seemed to take the coverings so totally in her stride, always finding the bright side to life, somehow. Why did she have to die like that? She didn't choose what she was; we are born, not made, how do they blame us for how we were born? I was crying under my facemask and I wanted to be dead as well, but I couldn't not look at Fitzgerald. I had to look at her, I was her friend, and the last thing I could do for her was to look at her, and remember her in death.

Then they threw me on top of her, and started to throw things, but I barely noticed, because I'd landed next to Fitzgerald's face, and her eyes were open, and her face was awful, but her eyes were open,



and I could see that they were blue, a real sky blue and they were the most beautiful things I'd seen in a long time, and they made me cry more and I had to try to stop, so I wouldn't shake or make a sound, and finally when the crowd got bored and left I got up and went back home and drew Fitzgerald's eyes next to Shelby's face. Then I drew what I thought Gillespie's lungs might look like. And then I went to bed, but didn't cry.

### Wednesday, March 26th

Darwin and Hastings are dead. The Organ Donation Association caught up with them, and because they were living together, they were accused of collusion with intent to break the laws governing our kind. They were both killed using defibrillation, so as to minimise organ damage and now they're in other people.

I'm glad they gave me their things before the ODA took them. Next to Shelby's face and Fitzgerald's eyes and Gillespie's lungs I've hung up Hastings' pages and Darwin's one remaining tape of music, and I've put their names under everything and kissed everything. I drew Gillespie's hands as well. They were lovely hands. I don't think I got them right, but then drawing was never my specialty. I hope they're okay. I hope Gillespie would like them.

I've made a decision. I've decided not to die like Shelby, or Gillespie, or Fitzgerald, or be carted off like Darwin and Hastings. I'm going to take control over the last thing in my life. I'm going to make it into something that means something. I just have to find a way, think up something really amazing. And then I'll dedicate it to my friends, and to all those like me that I know who died, and those I didn't know who died and those who were still alive and suffering like me, everywhere, on every street, under every cloak, hidden behind every facemask. I'll dedicate it to all of us.

### Monday, March 31st

Tomorrow is the day I'm going to die. I doubt anyone will ever read this, because I'm putting it into the narrow space where my friends are remembered, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that it exists. That's all. I like to think that there are others like me out there, who have hung little memorials of their dead friends, and I hope so, but I somehow doubt it. So many of us are cowed into submission.

I don't cry any more. They've taken the tears out of me, and left me with a dull pain, that fuels my resolve. We are resolved ones, we always were, though in some ways, we were lazy in terms of our own rights. We always presumed we would be taken care of by everyone else. We assumed we were wanted.

Tomorrow I'm going to go to the top of the library. I'm on cleaning duty, so I'll be allowed onto the roof. I'll jam the door after I get up there and then I'll stand out on the ledge. I'll take off my facemask, and just as the police are running in the front door to come get me, and the crowds are looking at me, I'll sing one of Darwin's songs. Then I'll yell out one of Hastings' poems. Then I'll call out the names of my friends, and what they each did, before people decided they didn't want us any more. And I'll tell them what I did, what I still am. I'll tell them that wrapping me up doesn't change what I am, it just hides it. I'll tell them that we can't be got rid of just by being ignored, or being used as organ banks. Hurting us gives us more strength to be what we are, what we are all born to be.

And they'll all think I'll kill myself. I haven't decided on that yet. On the one hand, I could be a great martyr, being tortured by my government. On the other, I could be like those monks who set fire to themselves. I could hang myself, or cut my throat. I like that last one. Cut my throat and let my blood pour down the front of

the library, and let them try to wash it off, but everyone who was there will have seen that shifting art of time; every time they spill any water, my blood will turn up in their minds, spilling down the front of the library. It'll be gone in reality, but in their heads it'll stay. They think of me as pestilence, well let my infected blood stain their precious hall, where the work of my predecessors is locked away, treated as blasphemy.

I am so tired of what they make of us, but that just makes me more determined. It has always been a world of injustices, and we're not the most special people to be hurt, nor do I think I can end it. It can happen anytime, anywhere, to any group, and it was just our turn to be the unlucky ones. But perhaps, for one or two people in the crowd, I can turn the word 'artist' into something other than a curse. Maybe they might wonder what we're like. Maybe I'll wake up an artist tomorrow, one who was born like us, but not raised like us. By God, I hope so. We are dying too quickly, and we are part of this world, no matter what any government says.

My name is Gabrielle Dyham. I am an artist. I am a novelist who likes to sketch. I am going to die an artist. No black cloak can change that, no facemask can hide it, no cruelty can deny it. To those who would defy art, who would spit on my kind, who hate those born to see the world in a different way, if you have found this account, let me tell you this: you cannot succeed, you cannot destroy us for good, and you can all go soundly into hell.

And if you're very unlucky, you bastards, you'll find it full of artists. And you will suffocate for eternity among creative genius and people who will show you the world in a new way, force you to think and acknowledge the other side of the story.

Long live art, and please, somebody – anybody – save us. ✧



"I am a 22-year-old student of New Media and English at the University of Limerick. I fell in love with my course on the first day when they told us we could study science fiction in our final year.

"I started writing poems when I was eight. When I was fourteen, after a wonderful summer course in Literature, Drama and Writing at the Irish Centre for Talented Youth, I began to write short stories. I am currently working towards completing my degree and doing my final year project on science fiction and feminism.

"I was always a huge fan of science fiction and several years ago was given eighty SF novels, most of them from the seventies or earlier – twenty of them by Asimov – so I fell even more in love with the genre at that point. Recently I've begun to read more women writers such as Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ and I find the power of their writing raises the bar for me in terms of what can be accomplished with science fiction. The stories I like best are the ones that challenge traditional worldviews, and are a bit uncomfortable to read.

"The Faces of My Friends' came about when I was walking home from college, and thinking about freedoms and feminism, and how easily progress can be lost (this kind of thinking happens after a semester of cultural theory and a forty minute walk). The original idea was for a story dealing with women in the Taliban regime, who had once been doctors and lawyers and were stripped of all their rights, but I felt that particular story wasn't mine to tell. A week or so later I came up with something I did feel was mine to share, because the narrator could be anyone, anywhere, who was unfortunate enough to be in a group despised by those in power. I am convinced that freedom is everyone's responsibility to maintain when they can do so.

"I am still quite early on in my writing, and still finding out where my voice is, so winning this award was an incredible surprise for me. I feel that writing is something that can stick with someone all of their life, and I will continue to write as long as I have a pen and a piece of paper – or my laptop – to hand."





This is Mercurio's second story for *Interzone*. His first, 'Longing for Langalana', won the Readers' Poll for favourite story of 2006. Other stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Abyss and Apex*, *Sybil's Garage*, *Northwest Passages: A Cascadian Anthology* and elsewhere. He is an Associate Editor at *Sybil's Garage* magazine and a proud member of the highly regarded Altered Fluid writing group ([alteredfluid.com](http://alteredfluid.com)).

# THE SCENT OF



**T**hey met at sunrise in the Grand Glacial Chamber on the peaks of Shanriola. The teams of decipherers and the Presiding Council of naturalists and supernaturalists gathered to discuss the new signal that Ember-Musk and Scent-of-Moss had discovered encrypted within the alien ship's mysterious transmission.

Although Ember-Musk had visited the Chamber several times over the past year, he still marveled at its opulence. As they filed into the cavernous room, he noted the intricate etchings that lined the granite floors, and the polished marble walls that stretched fifty vertecs high, converging in a triangular skylight that framed the cloudless, golden heavens. The Council members congregated at the massive softstone roundtable while the scores of decipherers, including Ember-Musk and Scent-of-Moss, took their seats in the rows of basalt benches along the sides of the Chamber.

The Presiding Elder – a supernaturalist had been selected this cycle – stood in a mote-flecked sunbeam that streamed down through the skylight. He commenced the meeting with a short prayer and then puffed his midsection, releasing a thick, sweet mist through the engorged pores of his crimson carapace. The attendees inhaled his query: *Tell us, decipherers, does this new signal explain why the spaceship has failed to leave orbit, why it continues to ignore our entreaties?*

Scent-of-Moss stood up and flared her pores. She emitted a mist tinged with just the barest trace of burning leaf-wax: *I'm afraid this message we've uncovered is as perplexing as the primary transmission, Elder. Except...it contains a visual image.*

The dignitaries and decipherers simultaneously released a pot-pourri of sweet-to-sour scented vapors that swirled and amassed and quickly became indistinguishable from one another:

*You have an actual image?*

*Are they solid or translucent?*

*Why would the aliens hide messages within messages?*

*Are they naturalists or supernaturalists?*

They were, of course, no closer to understanding the aliens than they had been a year earlier when naturalists had first detected the spaceship orbiting their world, transmitting its confounding,

## MERCURIO D. RIVERA

## ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL DRUMMOND





# THEIR ARRIVAL

repeating signal. But now – at last – they had actual visuals.

While Tang-of-Mint, the Lead Naturalist, tinkered with the Chamber's quartz signal-projector, Ember-Musk raised his arms and everyone ceased misting. He sprayed a cleansing mist to dissipate the lingering smells and, when silence had fallen upon the room, released a brimstone-laced warning: *Scent a solemn prayer, and brace yourselves. I've seen it numerous times, and it's... I can't find the scents to describe it.*

The supernaturalists among them raised their red-hued visages skyward in plaintive prayer and the unpainted naturalists begrudgingly followed suit.

Scent-of-Moss turned a knob and the holomage coalesced into view above the roundtable.

A two-legged, two-armed alien stood before them.

Everyone simultaneously misted the salty scent of a storm-ravaged sea.

— HOLO-SEG 6 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 10:07:45 ■ 11/12/2251 —

You have to understand, our great solar-sailed ship, *The Deliverance*, had been in development for years before the invasion. It was over a century earlier that we'd detected the ninety-three reachable Earth-like planets, sitting there while we all dragged our feet. I guess you could say that our war with the Reviled lit a fire under us.

Who would have thought that our mission of exploration would turn into nothing more than a frantic scramble to escape our world, to flee the horror that had spread across planet Earth?

.....  
*What do you suppose it's trying to scent?* Scent-of-Moss misted. Following the meeting, she and Ember-Musk had spent three days holed up in their cavern studying the holographic image. *The signal's visual track comes through clearly enough, but the olfactory pathway appears damaged.*

Ember-Musk embraced Scent-of-Moss from behind and scraped the jagged crystals of his fore-arms against the nubs on her rear-arms in a way that he knew pleased her. Scent-of-Moss's smooth, ivory-white exoskeleton sparkled, and crystalline carbuncles speckled her four arms. She had an adorable habit of leaning forward on her dainty center leg, which otherwise dangled alluringly several inches off the ground. And whenever she stole a sideways glance at him, it accentuated her most attractive feature: the large, regal snout that made Ember-Musk tingle with desire.

*Ember-Musk.* She gently pushed him away. *I have work to do.* For the past year, Scent-of-Moss had obsessed over the riddle of the alien signal, using every naturalist tool at her disposal – mathematics, physics, biochemistry, cryptography – to try to decipher the primary transmission, a textual message that repeated trillions of

times at different frequencies. Their discovery of this new message, a holomage cleverly hidden within the interstices of that transmission, Ember-Musk thought, had only served to heighten the mystery.

It had also pushed them farther apart.

Ember-Musk had spent the day painting his face and torso a deep red and praying for a breakthrough.

*Have you checked for any masked scents?* he suggested.

Scent-of-Moss squirmed her tangy assent: *Spectral bouquets, emotion-based odors, psyche-scents, micro-aromas, subspace fragrances, algorithmically-encoded smells, genetically altered scents. Nothing. It's absolutely odorless.* She folded her rear-arms and rubbed her fore-arms in frustration. *Why would aliens go to the trouble of sending a ship across light years of space, just to show us mute images?*

*There are some who believe that they might be the heralds of the Gods, wife,* Ember-Musk misted. *That at first scent they will provide us the answers to all of our questions. Change everything.*

She released an overpowering molten-iron stench: *I know the Prophecies, Ember-Musk. But I just told you, the holomessage is utterly scentless. And whether they're 'heralds' or alien life forms, we still need to understand what they're trying to communicate.*

He exhaled the sweet, calming fragrance of cactus-blossom seedlings in springtime: *Yes, yes, of course.* Scent-of-Moss, like most wives, tended to look for answers strictly in the material world. Ember-Musk believed it was his duty as a husband and supernaturalist to remind her that life was more complex than that. After all, the true mysteries of existence – their Life Purpose, the love between a husband and wife, those ineffable qualities that brought them joy – could never be solved by analyzing a genetic strand or by studying the chemical composition of an aroma. Yet Scent-of-Moss, Ember-Musk realized, had continued to immerse herself more deeply in naturalism over the past year, to the exclusion of all else.

*You've smelled the rumors that have been wafting around?* Scent-of-Moss sprayed.

Ah, this explained her ill humor, he thought. He had whiffed traces of those rumors and knew that they would only exacerbate Scent-of-Moss's own worries, so he sprayed an even sweeter mist, and decided to downplay them: *Scent-of-Moss! Since when does a naturalist pay attention to gossip?*

She turned around and embraced him in her fore-arms.

*You're right, husband. It's nonsense. If it were truly a scout ship presaging some...invasion, it would have taken action a long time ago. Invaders wouldn't just stay in orbit so long, transmitting that same baffling signal toward us. No, it's clearly here to communicate something to us.*

*Is the Council still transmitting responsive sweet-scents?*

*Every day. But the ship doesn't acknowledge them. Either the aliens don't understand, or they're choosing to ignore us.*

*Could the ship be automated?* Ember-Musk scented.





*Its vast size makes me think otherwise. But I suppose it's possible that the aliens aboard didn't survive the interstellar voyage. If only we had the technology to fly up to it, to study the craft up close...*

*I've prepared a meal. Come, let's eat.* He pulled Scent-of-Moss's rear-arms.

She emitted a frustrated puff.

*Not everything can be explained by naturalism, wife, he gently reminded her. Sometimes the peace of mind that prayer brings us provides its own answers.* Ember-Musk emanated the numinous scent of a summer sea breeze at sunrise.

He realized this was an argument that husbands and wives had had since the dawn of time, and one they were unlikely to settle tonight.

*I know, I know, Scent-of-Moss misted. But let's go back to one of the first messages. One final time.*

Scent-of-Moss turned the dial on the signal-projector and the alien's holomage appeared in midair.

Each time Ember-Musk viewed it, it seemed less horrific. It didn't seem so farfetched that the Gods might conceive of such strange, delicate creatures as their heralds.

The alien clasped its two hands behind its back and paced back and forth. How it managed to maintain its balance on only two legs, Ember-Musk couldn't understand.

*What are those symbols scrawled above the image? he sprayed. I believe they may be some form of marker or identifier in the alien's written language, Scent-of-Moss answered. They're the same type of symbols the aliens used in the primary transmission.*

— HOLO-SEG 2 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 9:03:22 ■ 11/10/2251 —

How do I even begin? How do I tell you – whoever you are – about our final days on Earth? How do I put into words the chaos...the madness...everything that's been lost?

I've heard so many stories of how the invasion began that I'm no longer sure which ones are true. But this much I know for certain: the Apocalypse began in the Middle East, in Old Jerusalem. Some blamed it on an arms race run amok, a new weapon that ripped open the fabric of realspace and created the Fissure, a three-dimensional rectangle of light. There are those who described the Fissure as beautiful, a shimmering, golden doorway – but I can't allow myself to believe that.

Nothing that let *them* in could be beautiful.

For weeks the Fissure hung there harmlessly while puzzled scientists ran their tests. Then someone – no one knows who or why – spoke the dark prayer, a whispered invitation, and the hellgates burst open.

Given the infinite number of universes, I suppose we shouldn't have been surprised that somewhere there might exist beings that would jump at this invitation. But who would have guessed that the creatures that answered the call would resemble the grotesqueries of our fevered imaginations, our

worst nightmares? Something about them triggered a visceral revulsion in humans, a gag reflex. Was it their angular cheekbones and pus-yellow pallor? Their naked, sexless forms? Their perpetual, emotionless smiles? Their strange, featherlight footsteps, that made it seem as if they were adjusting to a new, weaker gravity? It was almost as if we knew on a molecular level that they were malevolent, that they didn't belong here. No, they were unmistakably inhuman. Unmistakably evil.

The Reviled flooded into our reality and launched a silent blitzkrieg, striking with their hollow, pointed tongues like slick cobras, piercing warm arteries and vacuuming the blood of helpless thousands in just the first night. And though their initial actions seemed haphazard, the Reviled proved far more intelligent than anyone had at first suspected, for they specifically targeted the scientists who might have had some idea of how to seal the Fissure.

The survivors of that first assault reported hearing the sound of victims retching followed by their high-pitched wails, but the Reviled, as always, maintained their eerie silence. We could see them, we could feel them, but somehow they remained cloaked from our senses of hearing and smell.

God help us, death had stepped through that doorway. The death of my world.

And we had invited it in.

.....  
*Do you notice that the large cavity beneath its snout repeatedly flutters open? Scent-of-Moss sprayed. In one of the previous messages it ingested what appeared to be some form of sustenance through this opening.*

*Really? Ember-Musk tried to visualize it, but had trouble doing so. It seemed so inefficient. He pointed to the alien's skull with his fore-hands. And what of those two orifices on the sides of its head, wife? The ones flagged by that protruding, rounded flesh?*

*I think they may be large pores, she misted. But the scanners still don't detect anything on the scent-track of the message stream, not even an iota of aroma.*

*The tiny proboscis seems somewhat primitive, don't you think? Ember-Musk scented. Not what one would expect from a sentient species, let alone a space-faring one.*

Scent-of-Moss inhaled deeply and seemed to consider his observations. Although she was the one who excelled in the natural arts, Ember-Musk, like any good husband, often tossed out ideas, theories that might inspire her. He emitted the balmy scent of a freshly dug, equatorial burrow: *Do you remember those animals in the Red Desert, the Barzelian crawlers, the ones that changed the position of their limbs to signal to others of its kind?*

Scent-of-Moss turned around and faced him. *Of course! The way the alien moves its two arms, the way it tilts its head. It may be some sophisticated form of motion-communication!*

*Play the next holo-segment, wife, he misted.*

— HOLO-SEG 8 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 11:11:45 ■ 11/17/2251 —

My wife Carla and I – along with hundreds of other engineers – toiled around the clock on the construction of *The Deliverance* in New Houston. Work on the ship, work that had stalled for years, gained a new urgency as world events spun out of control.

Within a year after the Fissure burst open, the Middle East and Europe fell. But by then the rest of the world had marshaled its forces. The American Axis and the Sino-European Alliance called a truce and worked together to launch a preemptive nuc-



lear strike.

You see, we actually thought we stood a chance.

[...]

After the first mushroom cloud dissipated, it looked like we had won. The Reviled had been vaporized. But then we realized that the nuclear firestorm had done nothing to seal the Fissure. Every day at sunset hordes of them poured through, seemingly unaffected by the radiation, drawn to our world by what we could only assume to be some mad, insatiable hunger. One night – inevitably, I suppose – a series of nukes failed to detonate, and the Reviled breached the perimeters. It's rumored that military personnel saw them through infrared goggles shifting shape into an ethereal mist that dispersed across the night sky. But more likely they'd activated some highly advanced cloak, we assumed, or perhaps they had a natural camouflaging ability. In any event, within a matter of weeks the Reviled had scattered across the globe and infiltrated every city on every continent. Once they'd penetrated the general populace, the nuclear option was eliminated.

The Final War had begun.

At greydawn, Ember-Musk undertook the Holy Ascent to the top of Mount Shanriola, not far from the Grand Glacial Cavern, with forty-eight members of their clan. The eruption of a small volcano a hundred kilovertecs to the west had occluded much of the sky and a steady flow of ash softly drizzled down on them. Not only decipherers, but farmers, rock-sculptors, Council members and healers, naturalists and supernaturalists, walked the well-trod dirt path that snaked up the mountainside. As they climbed the pathway, Ember-Musk looked down into the valley that he and Scent-of-Moss called home. Water-filled craters and patches of berry-blossoming red cacti pockmarked the landscape. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the beauty that surrounded him. Would Scent-of-Moss be able to experience this same wonder in her current state of mind, he thought to himself, the sense of the *sacred* inspired by these amazing vistas? Or would she only see meteorite impact craters and a valley shaped by millennia of erosion and magma-flow?

He had pleaded with her to forget about the holoinmage, just for a single day, to participate in the Holy Ascent, but she had refused. *I don't have time for rituals at this critical juncture in my work, she had scented, especially with the new season fast approaching.* Scent-of-Moss feared that with the expected influx of desert travelers and with a large segment of the current population expected to leave on the Desert Walk, a new Council might interfere with her work – or even replace them with different decipherers from among the travelers. He had tried to reassure her of their highly regarded status – they had discovered the encrypted holoinmage, after all – but she insisted that they couldn't rest on past laurels.

Ember-Musk had painted his exoskeleton a deep black to shield himself against the sharp drop in temperature on the snowy mountain peak. The air frosted white from his snout, and he hugged himself tight with his four arms. He tried his best not to exude any acrid fumes of discontent – there was no need to make others aware of the private matters between him and his beloved – but he had to admit that he was becoming impatient with her. Scent-of-Moss had disregarded their prayer sessions and now the Holy Ascent too.

The female naturalists led their coterie, scoping out the path ahead of them for rockslides, while the men followed close behind, scenting a group prayer for the desert travelers, asking the Gods to deliver them and their bounty safely. Ember-Musk also prayed quietly for both the patience and divine inspiration that might

help him assist Scent-of-Moss – indeed, all of his people – with the important work deciphering the aliens' messages.

By midday, they reached the summit of Shanriola. As they stood at the edge of an overlook, the ground's steady rumble suddenly grew in intensity. They stepped backward and rooted their center legs. The minor temblor caused rocks to crumble down the side of the cliff, but fortunately the ledge upon which they stood was, like their caverns, made of flexible softstone, which held firm. From here, Ember-Musk stared out at the other side of the mountain. Endless deep-red sand dunes stretched into the far horizon. In the remote distance, he could barely make out other mountains, not unlike Shanriola, that harbored similar oases and verdant valleys populated by other clans. Thousands of vertecs below their position, he spotted an encampment demarcated by brilliant red poles buried in the sand, a caravan of approximately two dozen travelers. The wanderers waited there, immobile, their snouts up in the air. The full moons had shone brightly last night, so the travelers knew that the ritual would take place today at midday. From this distance, Ember-Musk thought, the strangers seemed healthy and – from the opalescent sky-blue they had painted themselves – proud and respectful.

*As we have all sought food and shelter and succor in the kindness of our neighbors, the lead supernaturalist recited, so too shall we provide the same. And may the Gods, in turn, bless us all with such kindnesses.* With those words, Ember-Musk lined up side by side with all forty-eight of his clan mates, rear-arms locked together and carapaces puffed. Together, they released the thick, redolent sweet-scent vapors.

Within a matter of minutes, the travelers began to dismantle their encampment in preparation for joining their new community, an indication that they had picked up the fragrance.

As always, Ember-Musk found himself deeply moved by the ceremony. *It's life-affirming, isn't it?* he scented to the adolescent naturalist standing to his left. *Producing the sweet-scents is even more gratifying than receiving them after the long Desert Walk.*

*They come from the south so I expect they'll carry exotic foods, new paints, interesting new technologies with them,* she responded. *But more importantly, they'll bring healthy young travelers with them. Hopefully, I'll find a mate.*

The young girl's exoskeleton was barely hardened, but she spoke with the pragmatism of an adult naturalist. She had totally missed the spiritual beauty of the ritual, Ember-Musk thought. *If they're from the south, I have some experience translating their regional scents,* he sprayed. *And I can work with their decipherers to teach them our language.*

Scenting with this girl reminded Ember-Musk that he and Scent-of-Moss would likely have become parents in the past year, but for the priority they had given to their work over their personal lives. He tried his best to resign himself to this fact. After all, the life-plans of all decipherers had been put on hold by the alien transmissions. And his every instinct told him that the Gods had a greater purpose in mind for them, that these transmissions had some connection to the Prophecies. Once they had children, he and Scent-of-Moss would join a convoy and start the Desert Walk, until they found food and shelter in a hospitable new community, just like these travelers, he thought. Settlement, procreation, and relocation. This had always been the way of their people.

Even from this distance, Ember-Musk breathed in the gratitude of the blue-painted travelers.

*Scent-of-Moss, he scented, we will have our answers. I just know it.*





When Ember-Musk returned late in the evening to their cavern it appeared that Scent-of-Moss hadn't shifted position from when he'd last seen her at dawn. She seemed to barely pay attention when he scented a detailed account of the Holy Ascend and the blue-painted travelers who had arrived from the south.

The alien also looked unchanged, he thought, pacing left and right, holding its two spindly arms behind its bent back.

— HOLO-SEG 9 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 11:11:45 ■ 11/18/2251 —

Just when we were about to lose all hope we discovered the Achilles' heel of the Reviled – the same vulnerabilities, strangely enough, presaged by legend: sunlight, fire, sharp wooden weapons. This gave rise to both hope and hysteria, for most people viewed this as conclusive proof that we were dealing with supernatural forces. Myself, I stayed firmly in the camp of reason. Everything about the Reviled, their origins, their abilities, their weaknesses, had to have a rational explanation. That we didn't understand them yet didn't mean they were somehow exempt from the laws of physics. Plenty of theories certainly abounded. Their vulnerability to sunlight, some hypothesized, meant that their world orbited a star much different from our own, perhaps a neutron star or a brown dwarf. Others theorized that a genetic defect in the Reviled from inbreeding caused them an allergic reaction to the daylight. And most people – among rational thinkers, I mean – believed that a protective energy field of some sort surrounded their supposedly 'invulnerable' skin. The fact that sharp wood could penetrate this field while bullets, knives and other objects failed to do so, suggested that trees were alien to their universe. Of course, we had no evidence yet to support any of these theories, but the alternative... No, I couldn't accept the alternative.

Many people tried using crucifixes and other religious artifacts ranging from Stars of David to Buddha statues as weapons and shields, to no avail. In hindsight, it seems ridiculous, pathetic. But I can't blame them. You have to understand, we were beyond desperate.

Eventually, the military deployed the warbots – equine-shaped, low-level AI devices fitted with an assortment of weapons: napalm flamethrowers, sunlight-simulating highbeams, wooden scythes capable of slicing off heads like tree branches. A protective warbot monitored every city block at all times.

But we were no longer safe in open-aired metropolises where the Reviled could materialize at any moment during the night. We constructed domes over small communities, then eventually over entire cities and, once enclosed, found that the Reviled were powerless to enter without an explicit invitation. Massive sun simulators kept the cities lit at all times. And dedicated truckers and traders traveled during daylight hours between the domed cities – at least those in close enough prox-

imity to reach before nightfall – transporting and exchanging goods. In this way, secured in our vaulted metropolises, we reached a stalemate of sorts; we held the Reviled at bay for years.

But stragglers and nomadic tribes and others who had refused the sanctuary of the domed cities – or who had simply been unable to reach them in time – slowly fell prey to the Reviled.

And all the while, the hordes continued to pour through the Fissure.

Scent-of-Moss carried Ember-Musk in her fore-arms as she waded into the volcanically heated spring baths. From here, deep in the valley, they could see the row of orange-shaded moons begin their slow ascent through the clouds and over the snow-covered peaks of Shanriola. Several other couples downstream from them also luxuriated in the baths. Their children – still smooth-skinned and translucent and lacking fully formed exoskeletons – scampered in the sand, digging burrows with their rear-arms.

*I'm so glad you agreed to step away from that holomage for a few hours, Ember-Musk misted.*

*I've gotten nowhere the past few days with the motion language, if that's what it is. The alien's gestures appear random, almost as if accentuating the smell of a powerful aroma.*

A cool breeze blew, and the ground shook. All of the surrounding couples lowered their center legs to maintain their balance until the tremors passed while Ember-Musk lowered himself to his neck in the warm waters. *Don't worry, wife. I'll pray for more inspiration.*

*Why would the aliens hide a hologram within the gaps of their primary transmission? Why encrypt a message within a message? Scent-of-Moss scented. What is this creature trying to communicate to us?*

Ember-Musk didn't respond. Scent-of-Moss was with him at this moment, but only physically. He pressed his back against the smooth sandstone sides of the bathing crater, enjoying the magnified tingling sensation whenever the ground shook. While normal seismic activity caused the ground to tremble regularly, whenever a temblor struck, the vibrations increased dramatically. He enjoyed how they caused the searing bathwaters to swirl.

After a few moments, Ember-Musk released the soporific scent of damp greenwood through his facial pores and gently broached the subject he had avoided for far too long: *I'm worried about us.*

*What do you mean?*

*You hardly ever join me for prayer any more, he scented. And this is the first time you've stepped away from the project in months. It seems that that's all you care about these days...*

In response, she released the bitter scent of fresh Barzelian drop-pings: *Ember-Musk, beloved, this has nothing to do with my feelings for you. Beneath the boiling waters Scent-of-Moss pressed her carapace closely against his. This ship is the greatest discovery in history. To finally learn that we're not alone in the cosmos! To have the answers to so many questions so close at hand! Now isn't the time for me to be diverted by prayer.*

*Wife, how can you scent such a thing...?*

*Prayer didn't lead to the discovery of the alien ship in orbit last year. Prayer didn't help me discover this encrypted holomessage.*

*Well I prayed for it, wife, Ember-Musk scented. I prayed for a breakthrough, and it happened.*

She released a thick, skeptical fog: *You can't rely on faith alone to understand the universe, my husband.*

*I never scented that. If there's one thing the Prophecies teach us, Ember-Musk prayed, it's that every successful union requires...bal-*



ance. *This is why the wife's focus is naturalistic while the husband's is supernaturalistic.* He placed his fore-arms on her shoulders. *Please, let me be a good husband. Don't shut me out.*

They scented nothing for a long while. A child ran past their bathing crater in the direction of the community caverns.

*Do you think the alien might be a child?* Scent-of-Moss misted. *It has no exoskeleton...*

Ember-Musk reached for the bucket of rancidus he had prepared, Scent-of-Moss's favorite, and dunked a brush into it.

*Enough about the alien. Let's eat,* he misted. He slathered a thick layer of food across her face, neck and shoulders. Her pores flared and she ingurgitated heartily.

Blue lightning flashed across the sky. More children skittered into the caverns as razor-sharp hail began to fall. He and Scent-of-Moss lifted their arms out of the waters, exposing them to the vibrating hail, which scraped their crystal protrusions and created intricate patterns in them. A hail-shard occasionally found smooth skin and embedded itself, starting the formation of a new crystal.

As they lay there, Ember-Musk smelled a cloud of contentment enveloping them for the first time in months. He fervently wished that this moment would last forever, that nothing would ever change between him and his beloved. But just as he finished this thought, he sniffed a faint trace of restlessness emanating from Scent-of-Moss, whose thoughts no doubt had turned once again to the mystery of the messages within messages being transmitted by the alien vessel.

Ember-Musk left the worship-stones on the basalt shelves and decided to go see Scent-of-Moss in the fore-cavern. She was supposed to have joined him for a prayer session an hour earlier. He had coated himself with a new layer of red paint and felt refreshed and beautiful.

When he entered the work-cavern, he observed her books and metal tools – the magnifiers, power cells, genetic analyzers and translation devices he couldn't recognize – strewn about.

Scent-of-Moss stared motionless at the alien's holoimage, which continued to emit the same irritating vibration. When she sensed his approach, rows of pores on her shoulders opened and a fog of frustration filled the air.

He decided not to nag about the missed prayer session.

Scent-of-Moss then activated a second projector and the holoimage of Tang-of-Mint, the Lead Naturalist, appeared. Tang-of-Mint was responsible for collecting and synthesizing each deciphering duo's findings, and he filed regular progress reports all decipherers could access. The projector's circular base spun slowly – first left, then right, then left again – spraying a mélange of highly technical odors Ember-Musk had trouble following.

After Scent-of-Moss finished sniffing the report, she turned to him. *There's been no progress deciphering the holomessage, but other teams have made some headway with the written text in the primary transmission,* she misted. *They've also analyzed the alien's movements and theorize that instead of an exoskeleton it has an internal frame beneath its rubbery covering.*

Ember-Musk jetted an acrid puff of doubt. *Internal? That defeats the purpose of an exoskeleton.*

*The varying coloration of its face also suggests that it has a circulatory system like ours, though it's difficult to tell where its pump is located,* Scent-of-Moss scented.

Ember-Musk released the scent of a sandy shore at high tide.

*It's so smooth and delicate,* she sprayed.

He gently scraped her rear-arms to relax her.

*It's perfectly symmetrical,* she continued. *Just like us, only it has a*

*single arm and leg on each side rather than two. And it has only one eye. No corresponding one exists on the right side if its face.*

*The single eye is certainly unusual,* Ember-Musk scented. *What about those thin transparent tubes it sometimes attaches to its arms?*

*The tubes may be decorative, like the fabrics in which they sheathe themselves,* Scent-of-Moss answered.

Ember-Musk reached out and gently moved his right fore-hand through the holoimage, tracing the outline of the alien's diminutive, almost vestigial, snout. He imagined how such a soft, fleshy being might feel. Shuddering, he pulled his fore-hand away and rested it on the projector base.

*Scent-of-Moss,* he scented. *The projector is...vibrating. Is it damaged?*

*No, it appears to be a defect with the transmission itself. I detected it a few days ago, but haven't been able to clear it up. For all their technological achievements, the aliens aren't infallible apparently.*

Scent-of-Moss turned the projector's dial and another message entry began. The alien had changed the colors of its peculiar fabrics, but otherwise stood there the same as always, scentless, silent.

— HOLO-SEG 11 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 13:24:35 ■ 11/19/2251 —

The stalemate dissolved as the ranks of the Reviled grew exponentially. While the Fissure continued to spew them out, our casualties increased to the tens of millions and continued rising.

I've seen it firsthand. I've seen up close the way the enemy kills. I've seen them...

Dear God, help me forget, help me forget...

*Are you certain that its motions don't convey a message, wife? See how it covers its facial cavity with its hand and lowers its head?* Ember-Musk misted.

It's beyond horrible, beyond monstrous. Their sharp, black tongues pierce the jugular. The victim alternates between gagging and shrieking, while...

Carla, oh, Carla...

*Yes, its shoulders also shudder during this section,* Ember-musk, Scent-of-Moss misted.

*The transmission now seems to be operating normally. The projector has stopped shaking,* Ember-Musk sprayed, his hand on the circular base. *No, wait, it's begun vibrating again...*

Damn them! Damn their twisted smiles! Monsters, aliens, demons, what difference does it make? In the end, they destroyed my life, they obliterated our civilization! And for what purpose?

What were they feeling? What were they thinking?

[...]

Breathe. Breathe.

I've got to get a hold of myself. I have to focus. I have to finish. My personal history is irrelevant. My life is irrelevant. What matters is the larger picture.

[...]

Six domed cities fell when the Reviled somehow secured an invitation from soldiers posted near the entrances. Since the creatures didn't speak, many people speculated that the Reviled had the ability to mesmerize human beings over short distances, to manipulate them into extending invitations or otherwise doing their bidding. I don't believe this. Not when





there was a simpler explanation. You see, we learned through deadly trial and error that simply verbalizing a welcome wasn't sufficient. To be effective, the invitation had to be sincere, heartfelt. And despite all that we suffered, everything we'd lost, there would always be some person who harbored a secret curiosity to see the Reviled, to try to communicate with them. It's part of our nature, I suppose. It shouldn't have surprised us that a trucker or some soldier, one out of thousands stationed at a city entrance, might succumb to the temptation to invite them in.

I have to confess, of all the characteristics of the Reviled, it is this matter of the invitation that perplexed us most of all. Why would a predator stop in its tracks to ask for its prey's permission? The common belief among my people was that the Reviled were demons, cursed by God to roam the universe forever seeking the consent of potential victims who would never give it. Humanity, however, just couldn't resist the temptation of evil.

I don't believe in curses. I don't believe in demons. But I do believe in God, just not a cruel God who stacks the decks against us and lays traps for us that we can't overcome. I believe in a God who's created a universe with rules, and that He's blessed us with an understanding of the scientific method that allows us to make sense of that universe.

So why then do the Reviled need an invitation? I don't believe the answer to that question can be found in the hard sciences. Nothing *physical* prevents them from entering. No, I'm convinced it has sociological, psychological origins in their alien culture. It must be based on some deep-rooted ritual, some rigid societal stigma, something so outside our experience that it seems nonsensical at first blush, but really isn't. We simply lack the *context* to understand it.

Once the Reviled secured invitations, they stormed the city entrances. But they didn't get far under the constant glare of the sun simulators, which kept them at bay.

Other cities responded by taking the preventative measure of stationing teams consisting solely of warbots – immune to temptation, immune to curiosity and betrayal – near every point of entrance and egress.

In the decade that followed, while chaos erupted around us, our team continued the construction of *The Deliverance*. In the meantime, another stalemate of sorts was reached. Humanity relegated itself to fifty-eight slowly expanding domed cities, while the Reviled inherited the rest of the physical world: the mountains, the deserts, the oceans. Earth's remaining animal population thrived, except for chimpanzees, gorillas and other Great Apes, which were reportedly exterminated. From their behavior, it was clear that the Reviled had their eyes set only on higher forms of life as their source of sustenance. Many wondered about dolphins and whales, whether the Reviled

had ventured into the ocean's depths to annihilate them too. This confirmed the theory that it wasn't blood *per se* that they lusted after, but the lifeblood of sentient beings.

During the misguided armistice attempt of the 2240s, we actually manufactured artificial blood to supply to them. Maybe they were just hungry, some had reasoned. But the bags of blood remained untouched, and negotiating with an implacable, silent foe proved impossible.

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*Ember-Musk, I believe that these aliens normally have two eyes. Judging from the discolored tissue on the right side of its face where the second eye should be, I think it may be injured, Scent-of-Moss misted.*

*Wife, these vibrations the projector base generates... Have you noticed that they seem to coincide with the pulsing of its facial cavity? Did you ever consider...?*

*What?*

*Did you ever consider that it might not be a malfunction? Perhaps this tingling is itself a form of communication.*

The pores on Scent-of-Moss's shoulders opened wide and the thick, inspired aroma of moist, mint-fresh lichen permeated the work-cavern.

Ember-Musk turned the dial again. They both leaned forward and placed their open hands directly on the projector-base to better feel the vibrations.

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— HOLO-SEG 12 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 13:24:35 ■ 11/20/2251 —

Our planes rained napalm bombs on their approaching masses outside the city perimeter. But the Reviled countered by digging bunkers in which they took cover and waited for the fires to subside; carbon monoxide from the raging chemical fires had no effect on them. A section of one city's dome came down in flames when thousands of the Reviled hurled their blazing bodies at the structure.

And still their numbers continued to increase.

As we grew more and more desperate, we tried every conceivable strategy to destroy them. Biologists designed a deadly strain of super-leukemia that killed in a matter of days and implanted the cancer cells in our frontline soldiers. We exterminated thousands of the creatures in this manner, for the Reviled couldn't resist feeding on them – even when it surely must have become obvious the soldiers were poisoned. But ultimately, the most effective way to kill them required us to sacrifice our own people – an unacceptable approach given the sheer number of enemy forces that continued to flood through the Fissure.

Eventually, we developed an airborne virus that targeted white blood cells – since they consumed blood, we reasoned, maybe this would affect them. We loaded the virus onto bombs that we dropped in the vicinity of their bunkers. The city's entrances had to be bio-sealed to protect the general population, but we exterminated hundreds of thousands of the Reviled in this manner. Countless motes of fine, golden dust scattered in the wind.

In response, the Reviled launched their most ruthless counteroffensive of all.

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Ember-Musk entered the fore-cavern and Scent-of-Moss immediately emitted the excited stink of burning sap-scum: *Your hunch was right, Ember-Musk! There's no question, the pattern of vibrations is a sophisticated form of communication. The opening and closing of the*



large orifice below its snout corresponds with the patterns, suggesting that part of the alien's internal anatomy allows it to generate the vibrations! I've informed Tang-of-Mint and he's notified the other teams. We've got everyone working on analyzing these patterns...

How is such a thing possible? Ember-Musk scented. Wouldn't its world's natural seismic and weather activity mask this type of communication?

Perhaps they evolved on a planet less geologically active than ours, Scent-of-Moss answered. One where it might be feasible to utilize such a complex and tenuous form of communication.

True, it has no center leg to stabilize itself. But still, how would they communicate over even modest distances?

In the same way we have pores, they must have biological vibration detectors, Ember-Musk! It's the only thing that makes sense.

He had never breathed such excitement from Scent-of-Moss before. Behind her, the image of the inscrutable one-eyed alien continued flaring its face-cavity, gesticulating wildly.

— HOLO-SEG 13 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 09:03:22 ■ 11/22/2251 —

While we frantically made final preparations to board *The Deliverance* for liftoff, the reports from other cities came streaming in. The Reviled had uncovered the early programming designs for the warbots in laboratories and research facilities outside of the domed cities. Within weeks, they had developed their own warbot prototype and launched a coordinated assault against forty of the fifty-eight domed cities. Their warbots, requiring no invitation to barrel through the city perimeter, squared off against our own AI devices and eventually, in the resulting pandemonium, soldiers were dragged off and somehow compelled to extend invitations. Clad in black, high-tech skinsuits and goggles that shielded them from the sun simulators, the Reviled stormed the cities like giant, mutant rats, day and night, with no letup.

How can I possibly convey to you the utter turmoil, the total panic in the air...?

Once they'd destroyed the sun-simulators, the dark, enclosed cities served as perfect holding pens for their – there's no other word for it – livestock. They reveled in the enclosed quarters, silently gorging themselves.

[...]

One by one the cities fell until eventually, just a few days prior to *The Deliverance*'s scheduled liftoff from New Houston, the warbots of the Reviled crashed through the frontline defenses. Within hours, we were defeated.

How I wish the story ended there.

[...]

Why? Why did you forsake us, God? Why did you abandon us to their depravities? Didn't you hear our prayers? Were we so utterly unworthy?

Wife? Ember-Musk scented. He stepped into the fore-cavern to deliver the news.

It's slow going, Scent-of-Moss misted absentmindedly as she gazed intently at the holomage, but I've managed to enhance the vibrations. Others have started to break down tiny bits of information.

Wife, he scented, a message came through from Tang-of-Mint a few moments ago. The Council has called another meeting. He stepped between her and the holomage and finally got her attention. One of the other deciphering teams... he scented. They've decoded the primary transmission.

When they entered the yawning Grand Glacial Cavern, the sweet-sour tang of lingering curiosity swirled in the air. The decipherers who had decoded the primary transmission had not yet arrived.

Ember-Musk and Scent-of-Moss took their place with the other deciphering duos on the side benches while the Elders sat at the roundtable, softly scenting to one another.

Scent-of-Moss removed her portable projector from its carrying case. A familiar naturalist whose scent-signature escaped Ember-Musk sat next to them. She reeked of moldy cactus-needles: *Congratulations on your discovery, Scent-of-Moss, Ember-Musk. Vibrational communications! Who could have conceived such a thing might be possible?*

*The universe is vast and mysterious,* Ember-Musk replied.

*I just wish that we were closer to unlocking the secrets of this holomage,* Scent-of-Moss misted.

*Perhaps the textual transmission will shed light on the subject,* the naturalist responded.

Scent-of-Moss turned the projector's dial and the holomage – reduced in size so that it stood unobtrusively in the palm of her third fore-hand – commenced vibrating again.

— HOLO-SEG 15 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 09:03:22 ■ 11/26/2251 —

My people believe that history is written by the victors.

I wonder what the Reviled will write about us, about the war. Not that we've ever seen them writing, mind you. In fact, we've never heard them *speak*. But they're unquestionably literate judging from their ability to use our medical and military records to their advantage.

Were we anything to them besides food? Did they mourn their own losses? Were they even capable of such emotions?

If you're listening to this, I need to tell you – whoever 'you' are – that the finest legacies of our civilization, our art, literature and technological achievements, still exist unblemished on our beautiful world if you dare to trace this ship's path back to its point of origin.

They've kept me here in my holding pen aboard this ship with a few dozen other survivors, engineers who'd been working on *The Deliverance*. They fed us and extracted our blood through these intravenous tubes three times a day. The others are all dead now. I'm all that's left of humanity. It won't be long before I'm dead too, before the human species is finally extinct. The only silver lining is that for all their canniness, the Reviled have hunted their prey to extinction. At least that's the way it seems. Sometimes I wonder whether this might not be part of a larger plan they have. Could this be the way they operate, destroying species, going into an eon-long dormancy, then resurfacing when summoned again by a new intelligent species? Or maybe, just like humanity, which rendered so many species extinct, their urge to hunt and kill simply knows no rational bounds and they've committed suicide in the process. I pray it's the latter.

Before we left Earth, the Reviled downloaded diagrams of *The Deliverance* to the rest of its kind. I'm afraid that they may be constructing other ships, targeting the other habitable worlds we've detected, and that more ships will be following this one.

I'll be dead decades before this journey is completed. But if the legends are true, if the Reviled truly are immortal, they'll suffer horribly from hunger during the remaining years of this voyage. I doubt that they'll be able to live through the centuries-long trip through space. But if they do manage to



survive, can you imagine how it will feel to know that kind of boundless, ravenous hunger, and to be unable to die...?

They *deserve* to suffer.

At least they won't be able to use the ship's stasis-pods to stay alive. We managed to damage them during that final day of battle. Strangely, sometimes from my cell I'll spot one of the Reviled in a distant corridor lying down in a pod anyway. Perhaps it's just bored. Though sometimes – I try not to think this way, but sometimes I can't help it – I wonder whether it's perhaps because of the pods' coffin shape. Who knows what the goddamned fiends are thinking? They've turned off almost all of the ship's lights and seem to bask in the blackness of space.

In all the years I've been here, I've only been approached once by one of them. It stood in front of my cell, its white ghoulish face staring hard at me through the plexiglass. I fought through the nausea and stared right back at it. Maybe I'm giving myself too much credit, but I'm convinced it was trying to communicate with me. That it was trying to tell me something through some alien sense I was incapable of registering, but that it just couldn't find a way to bridge the enormous gulf that exists between us.

I'm proud to say we never stopped fighting. What they don't know is that I've been able to hack into *The Deliverance's* communications systems from the routers behind a wall-panel in this room. That I've managed to hide humanity's epitaph, *this warning*, in the gaps of this ship's transmission signal – should this ship ever, in fact, send a message.

I pray that I'm right about their mortality, that if this ship reaches its final destination all you will discover is human skeletal remains and thousands of piles of fine dust. But I

fear... Oh, what I fear.

Scent-of-Moss and Ember-Musk kept the projector running, but turned their attention to the Council.

The decipherers who had decoded the text of the primary transmission – a tall naturalist and her scarlet-hued betrothed – stood at the center of the room. A sunbeam streamed down on them through the skylight. All scents dissipated, awaiting the news.

*We made a major breakthrough with the primary transmission yesterday, she misted. That's when we discovered that, like the hologram, the text too is accompanied by vibrations. In fact, the bulk of the data consists of this stream of pulses. Unlike the hologram's vibrations, however, which originate from the alien's anatomy, these appear to be computer-generated. By using certain of the rudimentary vibrations of the hologram as a deciphering key, we were able to make sense of a few patterns in the primary transmission, the tall naturalist continued. In fact, once decoded, we could barely believe the message's simplicity.*

Quizzical, pungent scents now permeated the chamber.

*The message is: 'Invite us'.*

An Elder sprayed a cactus-scented mist: *But we've been transmitting the sweet-scents for months now.*

*Clearly, they haven't understood.*

*So all this time they've waited, another Elder scented. After traveling light years through space for who knows how long, they've waited patiently in orbit for us to transmit the sweet-scents in their language. Remarkable.*

*Who can explain the strangeness of the alien mind? the naturalist responded. Perhaps it doesn't want its actions to be mistaken as hostile. It's asking us to transmit an explicit invitation along with landing coordinates.*

Scent-of-Moss misted softly to Ember-Musk: *We should at least*

# Black Static Three



*decipher the vibrations accompanying the alien holimage first. It would be prudent to examine all of the evidence before deciding on our course of action.*

Scent-of-Moss began to stand up and Ember-Musk pulled her down. *Why must you always obsess about 'evidence', wife? Why – just for once in your life – can't you simply...trust in the Gods' plan for us?*

*Ember-Musk, I can't explain it, but something's not right.*

*Scent-of-Moss... he pleaded.*

They were interrupted when the tall decipherer's supernaturalist betrothed stood and released a cleansing mist that dissipated the crowd's scents. He then sprayed: *There's an additional request: the transmission asks that our invitation be earnest and heartfelt. We've been asked to pray for the aliens to join us.*

The Presiding Elder lifted his red-painted visage to the sky and released a sweet, sweet vapor of joy: *Ah, so the visitors believe in prayer! They've asked for both a transmitted invitation and a prayer, a combination of naturalism and supernaturalism.*

A zephyr of the sulfur-tinged sea breeze at daybreak blew through the Chamber.

Scent-of-Moss stared wide-eyed at Ember-Musk as she joined the others in scenting her own profound wonder. Slowly, she reached out with her rear-arms and embraced his fore-arms. And for the first time in a long year, Ember-Musk smelled their individual scents, warm ash and cool greenmint, wafting and swirling and intermingling into a new aroma he could only describe as the quintessence of harmony.

— HOLO-SEG 1 OF 15 ■ SHIPTIME 09:05:01 ■ 11/01/2251 —

Danger! Beware! This is a warning. I repeat: this is a warning. My name is Antonio Valencia Astacio and I am the last human

alive. If you're receiving a transmission from this ship, you are in terrible, terrible danger. The creatures aboard this ship have ruthlessly exterminated my people.

*They're relentless. Unstoppable. And they learn.*

If you're listening to this message, and this ship is already orbiting your world, it means that – God help you! – death and destruction are lurking at your doorstep.

But it's not too late! Simply turn them away. Deny them entrance and they'll be powerless to act.

Listen to me! Before I begin my story, before I tell you about our final days on Earth, about the Fissure, about how all of this came to pass, I beg of you, don't welc–

Ember-Musk turned off the projector as the Council called for a decision. Within minutes, they voted unanimously to transmit the translated *sweet-scents*, inviting the strangers to join them.

It filled him with pride to think that his people had finally solved the riddle of the primary transmission. It wasn't surprising to him that both naturalism and supernaturalism had played a part. He had never doubted that both worldviews, working in tandem, were necessary to better understand the universe, as the Prophecies had foretold.

As a team of naturalists, including Scent-of-Moss, transmitted the landing coordinates, the rest of them prayed. And within a matter of hours, the ship's colossal shadow fell across the continent, obstructing the light that poured through the Chamber's skylight.

When the heralds come, Ember-Musk thought, at the first scent of their arrival we'll understand our role in this strange, vast universe. At last we'll have our answers.

A tangy-scented mist of joy filled the air, a rapturous joy borne of wonder and curiosity and faith. ✧



out in february -  
and he's back!



One of the iron laws of film reviewing is never, ever trust a film that sends a screening invite to *Interzone* without having to be pestered for it first. I learned this the interesting way in 1985 with the very first film I watched for IZ, memorable now for an encounter whose significance could hardly have been guessed at the time. I'd arrived at the screening knowing no one, but was taken generously under wing by the porn-mag crowd, a bunch of savvy young freelancers who'd found that the top-shelf glossies paid surprisingly decent rates for well-written film journalism. The reviewer for *Knave* was particularly fun, fannish, and welcoming, and even more startlingly turned out to be an IZ subscriber; and he pointed out a man in his fifties whose name was familiar from one of those minor British sf novels that any fan who spent enough time in second-hand bookshops ended up owning eventually. Not being a convention-goer, he had probably never in his life been in a room with two people who'd read his novel; and this, plus the liberal topups of wine, went alarmingly to his head. In the unshakable belief that he was talking to Kim Newman, he transferred his attention from the relieved *Knave* man and held forth passionately and relentlessly on the state of the genre, continuing to call me Kim throughout, until I was at last rescued by the start of the film.

This, as it turned out, was false deliverance: the film was Avi Nesher's bizarre spaghetti-peplum remake of *She*, which had already been on the shelf for two years, and still deserves to chart high on anyone's list of 100 Films to Die Before You See. Even in its moment, when a fusion of *Mad Max* and *Conan* didn't seem complete commercial seppuku, it was a startling reimagining of Haggard's safely out-of-copyright intellectual property, with an underclad and visibly uncomfortable Sandahl Bergman translocated in the title role to a soggy post-holocaust California (actually Italy) peopled by mutants, bandits, and mad scientists, all to a Rick Wakeman soundtrack and a Justin Hayward end-title song ("Eternal woman, you are proud, you are alone," &c.) which between them seemed to have consumed most of the budget. Even by the standards of car-crash cinema, this was something else, and we dregs of the London film press watched with jaws slowly falling off. "Well," chortled *Knave* to the new bug from IZ as the lights finally came up, "that was a baptism of fire." Needless to say, *She* went straight to rental and was never reviewed, even by *Interzone*.

As it happened, I never saw the minor sf author again, though the Kim Newman thing continued sporadically and inexplicably for several years. But the *Knave* reviewer went on to do the Hugo-Nebula double twice over, on top of a creaking shelfload of pretty much every other award in the field, and in one giddy week in November 2007 had two of the top three films in the UK. One of these is a joyous gem and an instant classic of fantasy cinema, while the other is barking mad and leaves you with the absolute certainty that you have just seen the future of film. When the books are written, as one day they surely will be, on the cinema of Neil Gaiman, this extraordinary culmination of a decade of on-off adventures in film will surely at the very least mark the point when the rest of the world woke up.

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The epic of *Beowulf*'s strange making begins with co-writer Roger Avary, who did magnificent work on the Elliott-Rossio script for *Sandman* before clashes with producer Jon Peters put an end to his



involvement and the whole project subsided into its own dream-world limbo. But it was the resulting friendship that led Avary to invite Gaiman on board his cherished pet directorial project *Beowulf* – only for DreamWorks to put the Avary-Gaiman version into near-fatal turnaround while five rival *Beowulf* films came and went (literally, in the case of the bizarre German porn version) and even *Xena* did her three-parter TV epic subversion. And then the weird things happen: Robert Zemeckis fell improbably in love with their script and bought it out as his next project in the motion-capture revolution he'd tried to ignite with *The Polar Express*. Gaiman and Avary, no longer constrained by live-action budgeting, rewrote their low-budget set pieces for spectacle; and the result is a fearlessly uninhibited exercise in rewriting the rules of film for an unfinished technology whose poetics is still being invented.

*Beowulf* is, in effect, a showreel for an emergent art which remains seriously imperfect in its present early stage of development, but whose staggering capabilities still blast you in your seat like a burp from a dragon. In the current state of the art, Zemeckis' mocap technique still hasn't consistently mastered the trick of getting its digital puppets' eyes to focus consistently on a point, giving the performances a spacey, masklike character and turning great actors into an ensemble of botoxed zombies, like watching the *Evil Dead* remake *The 13th Warrior*. But at the same time the immersivity of Zemeckis' 3D camera is so revolutionary, especially in the extraordinary IMAX prints, that the sheer barminess of the whole enterprise becomes part of its sense of differentness from anything else: a mad script colliding with a mad director to produce something compellingly weird and new. If Zemeckis is right, and *Beowulf* convinces you that he is, then this film will soon come to seem like cinema's own *Beowulf*: a primeval, but by the same token foundational, work with its own haunting poetry and a vision that could only have been forged on the cusp of a momentous cultural transition between old and new worlds. "The time of heroes is dead, Wiglaf. The Christ-god has killed it, leaving the world with nothing but weeping martyrs and shame." Perhaps in a generation we'll be looking back on live-action filmmaking with the same mix of nostalgia and remorse. It certainly won't look much like the world we've known.

It's almost meaningless to try and say whether the whole thing 'works'. Purely as a reading of *Beowulf*, the Gaiman-Avary script feels to stand some way above the Crichton/McTiernan take but a bit below the low-budget Gerry Butler version *Beowulf and Grendel*. If it's wildly overblown, it's at least satisfyingly conscious of how deeply *Beowulf*'s reception is entwined with the history of twentieth-century fantasy. The day zero of modern *Beowulf* studies is 25 November 1936, when Tolkien delivered his seminal lecture on the poem to the British Academy: written, we now know, immediately upon completion of *The Hobbit*, and arguing triumphantly for the modernity of epic and of stories about cave-trolls and dragons. No

## MUTANT POPCORN › NICK LOWE



subsequent readings have escaped from Tolkien's elegiac exposition of the text as a meditation on the interaction between the pagan and the Christian – in the poem, in Anglo-Saxon culture, and in his own imagination – and its unity in the life-cycle of the warrior as a microcosm of the human condition. And Gaiman and Avary have taken this a step further, linking the Grendel and dragon episodes with a Hollywood-friendly central conceit (Gaiman's radical solution to the problem of narrative unity) that works a lot better than feared; and their script is nothing if not full-blooded, and refreshingly unafraid of lapses into the Pythonesque, with its hearty warrior blokishness and lusty Geatish 'songs' (actually chanted, perhaps to avoid having to pay Alan Silvestri yet more composer royalties). I'm not sure Beowulf himself survives the surreal graft of Ray Winstone's Estuary Geatish ("I am here to kill your monsta!") on to a buff and youthful American body. But after this film I'm not sure of anything any more.

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**Stardust** is a different and much more conventionally successful kind of venture, though still an extraordinary highwire act. This time Gaiman isn't directly involved in the script, but shining down in a watchful but approving producer role as his 1997 fairytale of quest, romance and enchantment is adapted instead by surprise screenwriting debutante Jane Goldman and director Matthew Vaughn. The source text is a piquantly odd and multiform work, originally written as a serial novel in credited collaboration with

its illustrator Charles Vess, pitched at adult readers and distributed principally through comics outlets, and yet nowadays best known in its slightly uneasy repackaging as a single-authored young-adult text novel. Vaughn's film embraces this new family audience, losing the rather ill-judged sex scene and further lightening the tone; Vess's art is used for reference and general inspiration, but wisely there's no attempt to follow its very specific and illustratorly idiom, and even the original structure is fairly freely reworked. The early scenes are a bit hit-and-miss, and the climax a largely nonsensical replot for the obligatory quota of noise and spectacle; but Goldman and Vaughan have done quite brilliant work on the middle act, expanding one of the book's best throwaway sequences into a warm and generous space at the heart of the story where the central romance can plausibly blossom in a way that seems rushed and implausible in the book.

Of course not everything comes off, but it's astonishing how much does. One of the hardest tones to hit in film is sweet, yet *Stardust* nails it better than anything since *Splash*. This is a film with a lot of very good smiling in it, and it doesn't take long for infection to take hold. The cast are phenomenal; Charlie Cox is a revelation, Michelle Pfeiffer hams her socks off as Evil Michelle Pfeiffer, and de Niro is preposterously unforgettable, while Claire Danes feels uncomfortably cast in her early scenes but by sheer persistence makes a pretty unplayable character beguilingly her own, and by the end she genuinely does light up the screen. It's been particularly gratifying to see such a risky prospect do strong business at home, since the book was a very British love-letter to *Lud-in-the-Mist* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter*; and though the film has softened and brightened the notes of melancholy in the mix, it still feels like a story told by people who genuinely love the traditions of classic literary fantasy. It's only when you see it done that you realise you've never seen anything like it attempted before.

.....  
 Certainly it's a much less happy landing for **The Dark is Rising**, latest in Walden Media's screen versions of cherished juvenile fantasy evergreens, and first in a prospective series it's difficult to see ever coming to sequel, despite the careful retention of the novel's major link to its own series climax. Unlike the same company's reverently faithful Narnia and *Bridge to Terabithia*, Susan Cooper's novel has been brutally reconfigured for the US mass market in ways that can hardly fail to horrify its actual readers: young Will Stanton is up-cast from 11 to 14 (no! *no!! WRONG!!!*) and horribly recast as an American in heritage England, with inappropriate hots for the evil Maggie Barnes, and (probably the worst of the many worst things about this wretched transformation) saddled with a hideous dysfunctional family headed by a failed male whose abandoned life's work is a bizarrely-conceived thesis on the physics of good and evil. (In contrast, not the least delightful thing about *Stardust* is that the father-son business is handled in such a resolutely British way.)

Cooper wrote the books after her move to the US, so it's possible to defend the recasting with the argument that the novels are themselves, on one of their levels, an evocation of the traditions and landscape of pagan England as seen from the wrong side of the Atlantic. But it's hard to forgive the systematic abandonment of so many of the book's and the series' core values in a woeful attempt to pander to a mass audience who, in the event, stayed away in their multitude. Some of the novel's powerful sense of landscape, mood, imagery,







and myth survives, but it's unfortunate that just about the one element of the plot treated with respect is the crudely mechanical coupon-collecting quest that was a major weakness of the series, and this volume especially, even in its day. For today's audiences, it feels for all the world like a rather dull computer game. Do you want to save changes before you exit? Nope.

That last choice comes from a key linking scene in *The Nines*, the directorial debut of Tim Burton's regular writer John August, who also scripted the undeservedly underloved *Charlie's Angels* and its deservedly unloved sequel, as well as maintaining one of the best professional blogs in the industry. Essentially yet another unacknowledged *Ubik* adaptation, *The Nines* is a puzzle-film structured as three shorts in which Ryan Reynolds' character plays in turn an actor, a TV writer, and a game designer whose universes interlock as each in turn starts to manifest unnerving signs of unreality and conspiracy. A checklist of possible twists is dutifully recited and rejected: "This is all a dream ... I'm in a coma ... I'm dead," plus another red herring which turns out to be pretty much true. It's a succinct low-budget composite of *Vanilla Sky*, *eXistenZ*, *The Number 23*, and *Stranger than Fiction* which nevertheless avoids sharing the actual twist of any of these, though lovers of E.R. Eddison's *A Fish Dinner in Memison* will figure it out soon enough.

Drawing both on August's experience as writer of movies and on his four-month addiction to *World of Warcraft*, it's an elegantly constructed if faintly scary writer's fantasy of what happens when the solipsistic and frankly schizoid Hollywood doctrine of the hero is extrapolated to its limits and melded with the still queasier image of the writer as cosmic creator. But it does leave you wondering whether even the most thoughtful and humane of these guys actually read anything at all apart from screenplays – particularly evident in the on-screen reduction of *Candide* to its famous catchphrase, with disconcerting indifference to what it means in the novel itself. Ironically, one of the hazards of hyphenate auteurial omnipotence is that small flaws in the creation become great tearing holes in the texture of plausibility: thus the attempted Latin phrase for 'oblivion approaches', an unfortunately recurring motif in text and dialogue alike, has a nonsensical single-letter typo which has duly been transferred to its written form and its various supposedly authoritative spoken versions from the characters. We also glimpse a T-shirt with the slogan 'Veritas Lux Me', though it's just possible that one's meant to be a clever joke. It's hard to tell.

*The Invasion* is a similarly self-conscious avatar of a multiply-told story, and the first incarnation of Jack Finney's novel to drop 'Body

Snatchers' entirely. This, it lamentably turns out, is because this latest generation of body snatchers don't actually snatch bodies at all, but merely infect them with a space endospore that takes over your *original* body – thus replacing the pod-grown duplicates, evidently felt a bit of a period embarrassment, with a tedious modernising homage to *I Am Legend* and its various credited and uncredited film versions. But what this of course misses is the vital driving force behind the plot: that the replacement of humans by alien impostors is *irreversible*, and that once they take you over in your sleep then the real you is gone, forever. When, at the end I'm not really ruining by telling you this, our heroes come up with a cure for the virus and vaccinate those mothers off the face of our planet, all the body-snatched loved ones who haven't been rashly bludgeoned to death can just come back to life and forget all about their brief stint doing absurd vehicle stunts and mowing down any dissidents who still insist on running out into traffic and banging on car windows and yelling "Help me! They're coming! We've got to warn people!" Nicole Kidman of all people ought to have known better, because they did exactly the same neutering job on her remake of *The Stepford Wives*, and look what that did for her burgeoning reputation as the Box-Office Kidman of Death. There's some interesting stuff about how leaving your kid with his dad will turn him into a stranger, but I liked the old paranoia best. At least you knew they were really coming to get you.

Still, in a busy season for new strains of the Omega virus, it's at least heartening to report that the weaponised variant in Robert Rodriguez' *Planet Terror* has no ambitions whatever beyond turning the world into gross-out zombie killers with 'chronic herpetic lesions' that go zit-pop when they're not being gorily shot up by her out of *Charmed* with an automatic for a leg and little Freddy Rodriguez trying to talk in a frightfully deep voice. Originally part of the unlucky Rodriguez-Tarantino *Grindhouse* project, it pays its own adoring tribute to a golden era of exploitation cinema its director surely can't be old enough to have lived through, and probably stands better on its own iconic feet than it would as part of an ensemble. The Machete trailer is a welcome survivor from the original double-feature package, but at the end of the actual film you've had such a saturate experience that you can see exactly why nobody would want to sit through *Death Proof* directly after. The dialogue is its own best description: "Looks like a no-brainer." "What does that mean?" "No brains. Scraped clean out of her skull." We've all seen films like that, though those who remember seeing them on the big screen are a dwindling band of survivors, and have the scars to show. **Nick Lowe**







BLACK STATIC





The re-release of **Hollow Man** (2000) reinstates about two minutes of extra footage – in particular, the rape of the mad scientist's neighbour (Rhona Mitra) – considered unacceptably violent by studio executives only a few years ago. The film's outstanding 3D animated effects present bodily transfiguration; a visibility fadeout slowly peeling away layers of anatomy down to living bones, in one vividly designed and

perfectly executed sequence, doing for science fiction's invisible man what *American Werewolf In London* did for the supernatural wolf-man. Paul Verhoeven's visceral thriller lacks narrative surprises as obsessed researcher (Kevin Bacon) turns psycho, but its clinical spectacle of quantum phase-shift makeovers remains fascinating to watch. Christian Slater tackles the central role (named Griffin, like Wells' original *Invisible Man*) for Claudio Faeh's rather nondescript sequel *Hollow Man II* (2006), which concerns an undetectable hitman stalking a female biologist. She confides in a police detective, and together they uncover secret government plans to create a veritable army of such homicidal 'ghost' troops. The finale boasts the visual effects' oddity of a showdown fight between two invisible soldiers. If you're a Wells' farrago completist, it's worth...um, seeing.



As personal stealth tech fills military requirements for the ultimate spy or assassin in films about invisibility, other films exploring the notion of tactical invulnerability via regeneration of flesh tend to deliver exceptionally high measures of gore and action. The latest configuration of this 'human experiments' scenario, David Mitchell's quite darkly humorous **UKM: Ultimate Killing Machine** (2006), uneasily

combines the SF horror of *Universal Soldier* (1992), with *Police Academy* style farce. Decadently amoral scientists surgically transform a mixed and misfit group of US army rejects into enraged and horny super-soldiers. Indie pictures often tackle stuff mainstream cinema steers away from, and here the links between sex and violence are explicitly stated, despite lacking Cronenberg standard levels of discourse or intercourse. *UKM* panders to the demands and expectations of teen viewers, offering unsophisticated – not infantile – fun, and cheesy antics (Michael Madsen routinely chews the scenery), but nothing more.



With the lazily amusing sci-fi comedy of *Mammoth* (2005), and the compelling Iron Age sacrificial gore of *Minotaur* (2005), already rampaging across our home screens, **Manticore** (2005), adds large-scale adventure to the on-going cycle of monster B-movies. Directed by Tripp Reed, this Sci-Fi Channel mission features Robert Beltran (*Star Trek Voyager*) and Heather Donahue (*Blair Witch Project*) leading a US army squad in Iraq, where they find at least one 'weapon of mass

destruction' in the shape of a mythical Babylonian creature, an indestructible winged lion with a scorpion tail. Borrowing from *Black Hawk Down*, and mimicking *Aliens* (a failed helicopter rescue mirrors that film's drop-ship crash), this watchable action thriller has some likeable characters, but it's letdown by uninspired or haphazard plotting, atrocious dialogue, and too much cheaply produced CGI work. As a result of those shoddy visual effects, the bloodthirsty beastie is never a credible menace, even when it's stalking troops in night shadows. Such conspicuous fakery is inexcusable when traditional stop-motion effects can look more impressive than this.



Following the multi cliffhanger finale of season five (all main characters lost, at risk, or left in mortal danger), season six of **Smallville** gets off to a relatively dismal start with Lois Lane and Martha Kent's painlessly survived arctic plane-crash, and Clark Kent's effortless escape from the Phantom Zone, while supporting players are saved – just like that! – from whatever dire threats were faced in Kansas town or Metropolis

city, and the situation returns to 'normal'. The TV scenario's reset button isn't merely pressed; it's stomped on hard. This enables a string of absurdly lucky reversals that would embarrass even the shameless by-their-bootstraps solutions practised by the re-makers of *Battlestar Galactica*. Most new episodes lapse into mutant freak-of-the-week weirdness styled as *X-Files*' mystery menaces, wrapped to go with superhero sitcom or wedding soap gift tags, and there's much quip scripting and chin-wagging bathos (especially from Lana Lang, portrayed vacuously by Kristin Kreuk) to confirm that this usually clever 21st century revision of DC Comics' familiar krypto-mythos is another favourite telefantasy series going into a swift decline. However, mid-season standout *Justice* reunites the un-costumed Superboy with fellow do-gooders Green Arrow, Aqua Man, Cyborg, and Impulse (the Flash in all but name), for some anti-Luthor action and wry comicbook fun despite those self-reverential slow-mo walking tall sequences that are needlessly portentous and awfully clichéd. If producers plan to unleash a more generous Justice League of America – 'the early days' story-arc, this lacklustre show will require a sizable budget increase, if only for its usually low-key special effects.



**Heroes** runs wild over 'super-team' territories where *Smallville* tiptoes gracefully. Created by Tim Kring, this is basically *Unbreakable* (2000) meets the *X-Men* trilogy (2000–6), with a flying politician (Adrian Pasdar), a precognitive artist, a teleporting Japanese comic-book geek, a schizoid stripper (Ali Larter, *Final Destination*) with a homicidal alter-ego, a mind-reading policeman (Greg Grunberg,

*Alias*), an ex-convict who can walk through walls, a radioactive man, a shape-shifter, and an indestructible *Buffy*-esque cheerleader (Hayden Panettiere), whose father (Jack Coleman) works for a

## LASER FODDER › TONY LEE





covert agency and is partnered with a sinister Haitian psychic. An Indian geneticist investigates predestined connections between various evolutionary special people, while FBI detectives hunt a super-powered serial killer, and the future of New York hangs in the balance. With conflicted protagonists facing the challenge of emergent conditions that threaten to overwhelm moral codes and smash fragile psyches, this series wryly lampoons and yet winningly represents the *Slan* fanboy pulp-SF dream of belonging to a peculiar elite group that share terrifying and momentous secrets, or co-operate to save an unsuspecting world from disaster, and protect innocents from malevolent forces. As mystery drama, it's certainly more genuinely intriguing than J.J. Abrams' overly manipulative and pointlessly convoluted, *Lost* (2004–8), but its 'international' cast is a television network's blatant scrabble for the widest possible audience-demographic appeal, with too many key roles reinforcing social, ethnic, or gender stereotypes, exposing an unfortunate lack of creative imagination. There is little chance any of these 'ordinary' folk gifted with extraordinary abilities could ever become larger-than-life or inspirational figures, so the resulting entertainment values prove to be an unhealthy mix of cynicism and blundering pretension. Standard b&w flashbacks, with conspiratorial revelations, abound. The invisible hermit/guru (ex-*Doctor Who* star Christopher Eccleston) might have made a difference but, tragically, he doesn't get enough screen time.



Produced by Pedro Almodóvar, **Acción Mutante** (1993) offers cult sci-fi/comedy horror, Spanish style, directed by first-timer Álex de la Iglesia, later the maker of deliriously twisted, road movie *Perdita Durango* (aka: *Dance With The Devil*, 1997), and weird western *800 Bullets* (2002). This ultra-violent futuristic farce sees a gang of disabled terrorists gatecrash a society wedding, kidnap and abuse the

bride, and escape in their ramshackle spaceship. Despite physical/mental problems, alienation and genetic abnormalities, Mutant Action are hilariously determined to bring havoc and ugliness to blissfully arrogant lives of health Nazis, wealthy celebrities and the beautiful people, and seem intent on the destruction of

everything that's popular and shiny, especially conformism and refinement. Fans of Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste*, Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element*, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, and Caro & Jeunet's *City Of Lost Children* will be delighted with the explicit gore, fringe political ranting, comic-book apologia, Verhoeven-esque media satire, the impolite machinations of our antiheroes' treacherous leader Ramón (Antonio Resines), and the sadistic inhabitants of cheaply retro, surreal mining planet Axturiat, where the grungy freaks' sabotaged spaceship crashes. Feminists, conservatives, or anyone of a nervous disposition, beware.



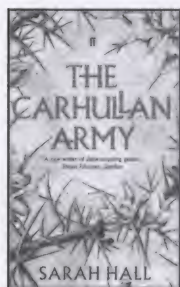
As it's been keenly anticipated for so long, perhaps it's appropriate to declare **Blade Runner: The Final Cut** (1982–2007) an instant-classic movie that was 25 years in the making, instead of this being simply a quarter-century anniversary DVD release. Whatever your views on the quick-profit commercial vs. painstakingly artistic nature of cinema, Ridley Scott's film is undeniably an influential, exhilarating, remarkable

piece of work, boasting more fascinating SF visuals (sophisticated retro-futurism), great action scenes (including one in which the downbeat hero shoots a woman in the back!), and poetic noir dialogue than any other masterpiece in the genre canon. Long-time fans will doubtless rave about a comprehensive five-disc tin, and copious extras of the attaché-cased blu-ray collector's item. There are sequel novels (by K.W. Jeter), 'making-of' books and critical texts available, but it's the main film that counts, and this definitive version reveals what a slapdash marketing exercise the 1992 director's cut was. As ultimate DVDs go, this edition offers much more than just a re-mastered transfer with tweaked effects and repaired faults. Unlike many filmmaker-approved special editions, it's not a pretentious/vanity project either, as forthright pragmatist Scott was fully aware of its merits and mistakes to start with. Ironically, it challenges the notion of what SF (about 'what it means to be human') represents in our hi-tech century, where actors become indistinguishable from 3D animation. Completed, not abandoned, *Blade Runner* is now 'great Art' to stand with Kubrick's *Space Odyssey*. **Tony Lee**





There seem to be as many ways to avoid 2007 as there are 2007s to avoid. Which is perhaps just another way of saying that sf is (or can be) a literature of escape. But as 2007 – all of them – is the case of the world we live in, what is avoided when an sf story is told as though we had never gotten here is a story that says we ourselves are not actually happening. Jack McDevitt's enjoyable but tunnel-vision-retro *Cauldron* is set 250 years hence in a world very mildly extrapolated from a seriously comfortable version of the future of the world that techno appatchiks in a seriously comfortable 1970 or so might have envisioned it *in their dreams*, leaving the planetary suicide they helped create completely unregistered, save for an occasional Brunneresque pull-quote about how, in the year 2255, we're just beginning to pull back from environmental points of no return it seems, to most sane people in 2007, that we have already irretrievably transgressed. Sarah Hall, whose earlier work has not been fantastic, pulls a retro feminist parable, involving a dystopian takeover of Britain by faceless sexist fascist minions of Christian America, out of some hat Joanna Russ or Suzy McKee Charnas or Sally Miller Gearhart might have worn thin thirty years ago or which Margaret Atwood might have clamped the tattered nap of to her bristling head a decade later, and writes in *The Carhullan Army* an extremely powerful exemplary tale whose foundering in the belatedness of its take on today is a genuine shame: because it's a melancholy experience to read a book this good sunk so far into a past it claims to be our future that our final response to the dreadful warnings it issues must be nostalgia: Gosh, if only it were that bad that *easy*. Only Michael Chabon is utterly clear that his second novel of 2007, *Gentlemen of the Road*, which is set in a Land of Fable tenth century, relates to the year of its publication mainly through the honour it accords to our need to be told stories of escape.



**THE CARHULLAN ARMY**  
**Sarah Hall**

Faber & Faber, 209pp, £14.99 hb

*The Carhullan Army* is presented as a sequence of seven statements, seeming laid down on tapes which have only partially survived, which constitute a testimony or confession of a 'female prisoner' from a time when Britain is governed (despotically, we may at once assume) by a regime using the 'Insurgency Prevention (Unrestricted Powers) Act' to oppress spirits such as she. "My name is Sister," she begins, which is the only name she ever gives us, and she later makes it clear – as the seventh (badly fragmented) deposition skitters through events leading to her final capture – that she considers herself a prisoner of war. That she is detained we know from the first page of the novel, which comprises a brief lemma describing the contents to come. Her ultimate fate is not mentioned in this lemma, but as we begin to read the seven tapes we begin to realise the significance of that lemma, which begins with a statement of provenance: "English Authority Penal System archive – record no. 4988: Transcript recovered from site of Lancaster holding dock." There is an archaeological feeling to this: something seems to have happened in Lancaster, maybe a very long time ago, something which transformed a prison into a

'site' from which fragments of data can be 'recovered'. Maybe – the first sentence of this novel suggests – the Carhullan Army wins after all.

Sister begins her narrative, somewhere up the line from 2007, in Penrith, several years after economic and environmental collapses have led to the collapse of democratic government as we know it now:

My father's generation seemed to die out quickly, though their lives had been lived in prosperity. The health system cracked apart. Epidemics swept through the quarters in every town and city. There were new viruses too aggressive to treat. Those who did not fall ill seemed just to fade away. It was as if, one by one, they made the decision that the present and the future were intolerable propositions. And maybe they were right.

This is eloquent, and it does describe something we do all recognise: but I think what we recognise is the slow stupefaction felt by the generation that my own parents (both born before World War One) belong to, and maybe the generation of those born in the next decade or so: the slow seeping away of reality they experience as the 1970s decade began to cavitate their sense of a story of the world. What I do *not* think is that so a description adequately characterises the response to the world of 2007 of a typical thirtysomething today: because that response is far more ingenious than Sarah Hall allows, commixing denial and opportunism, amnesia and escape, VR menuising and street-wise indifference to the poisonous banalities of our owners: we could go on. It is all hugely complex and enthralling and (sure) dire, and I'm utterly convinced I don't (being too old) really *get* it. But one thing I do know for sure: the thirtysomething of today is not surprised by today.

Sarah Hall's protagonist is surprised by yesterday. So *The Carhullan Army* is going to have to work as a kind of allegory of right behaviour seen in relief against the kind of rigid frieze-frame world that Brit sf writers half a century ago seemed to think the future would transmogrify into. In those terms, it is superb. Sister tells us of food rationing in Penrith, and humiliating birth-control devices implanted in women, which any soldier is allowed to examine with his fingers whenever it suits him, and Christian food packets (complete with homilies) from America. She tells us of her slow plans for escape. We follow her south-west into the heart of what was once the Lake District, whose topography and ecology Hall describes, or rather *laves*, with a succinct but encompassing presentness of diction I found utterly engaging. We reach the Carhullan farm or compound, where sixty or so women have for some years lived off the land. After an initiatory ordeal, she is accepted into the group. There is hard work, and sex (women with women and with a group of neighbouring men), and a tough-minded suss on just how tough-minded and tough-bodied one must be to make utopia in an era of climate change (Hall does mention that sort of thing, but does not really integrate it into the texture of her stark tale). Every once in a while a tone of piety intrudes – "For all their differences of opinion and different roles, the women at the farm were a tight community, respectful of each other and mutually helpful" – but in the end the farm sounds like a real place.

As does its skewed but charismatic (and ultimately plausible)

## SCORES › JOHN CLUTE



leader. The complexity of her treatment of this woman may be Hall's greatest accomplishment in this novel, over and above the taste of the soil; and insofar as *The Carhullan Army* is an allegory of necessary action against a definable foe, her own decisions are pretty well inevitable. The allegory's typical inability to portray the coils of human ingenuity does mark and cripple the book as a register of what where we live now and how it may feel to continue (Will Self's seemingly ludicrous *The Book of Dave* (2006), for instance, far more accurately captures the careening feel of these things); but as a frieze it glows. It is exemplary with pain.



### CAULDRON

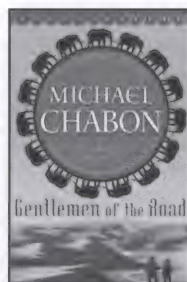
**Jack McDevitt**

Ace Books, 373pp, \$24.95 hb

Jack McDevitt is too able and smooth and likeable and engrossing a writer to have written *Cauldron* as much more than a recess from his proper work. 250 years have passed from now. The space programme is in trouble, though it's not 1970s near space that is being abandoned this time, but the galaxy itself; men and women have good or bad marriages in Washington suburbs; global warming is a threat but seems to be under control; commuters travel by flitters rather than automobiles; an exciting talk by an ex-astronaut at a local high school generates a sudden heavy use of the school library; there is no real evidence of the information revolution in the book, no evolution of net culture, no sign of singularity, no VR haven, no Kuttner keep, no genetic engineering, no nanoware, though AIs seem to exist (or perhaps they are only computers gussied up to sound sentient). The cast is almost exclusively white, middle-class, bourgeois, mostly bored in jobs (one of central characters is a real estate agent) it would be difficult to think will survive the next 250 years.

When a new hyperdrive is developed (some good stuff here) a gang of old salts gets finance to travel through McDevitt's back pages (this is volume seven of the very loose Priscilla Hutchins sequence) to various star systems where previous novels had focused. But as the crew (this is the year 2255) *have no proper recording equipment*, the damage they do to the relics of various dead civilisations across the galaxy is irretrievable. In the end, they reach the eponymous galaxy centre, where the secret of the Berserker-like 'omegas', whose destruction of any artificial structure with right angles all across the galaxy plagued at least one predecessor Hutchins tale, turns out to be comically simple: the omegas are rescue flares sent out by an entity trapped at galaxy central in the hope of rescue. Ah so.

The book was almost impossible to put down, though not *entirely* for reasons Jack McDevitt may have anticipated.



### GENTLEMEN OF THE ROAD

**Michael Chabon**

Ballantine Books, 224pp, \$21.95 hb

Michael Chabon's *Gentlemen of the Road*, which was serialised in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2007, is not in fact a work of fantastika, except in the sense that any tale tied to coherent story-telling is inherently fantastic. It takes place round about the Caspian Sea, and its protagonists – who rather resemble Fritz Leiber's Fahrd and the Gray Mouser, though the book's dedicatee is Michael Moorcock, and his array of haunted anti-heroes suffuses Chabon's duo in waves of sagacious embonpoint – find themselves embroiled in the succession to the throne of Khazaria. Each episode in their progress is as jeweled as in a dream, each sustained moment is a bead in the rosary of the psychopomp of Story. It is ago, knowingly. It is away, knowingly.

To reach far Khazaria, you've got to know where you started from. **John Clute**



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## DANDELION WINE

Ray Bradbury

PS Publishing, £20/£50 hb, £375 deluxe

Ah, nostalgia (as the old saw buzzes) – it ain't what it used to be...

The joke is older than the book in question, and might even have as many variations on it as the book's remarkable catalogue of reprints makes clear that it has; but it's a joke that recurs in the reviewer's mind, time and again, as he moves happily through a re-read of something consumed greedily and happily while still a child. Not only does re-reading this fiftieth anniversary version *strike up* nostalgia, the theme of nostalgia is very much part of the collection's warp and woof, as we take a look at Bradbury's Green Town through the eyes of young brothers – the Spauldings (though principally Douglas) – as finally summer arrives.

It's a bygone era depicted, of course (1928), but we will all have an equivalent to it: an equivalent to the happiness of beating dust from rugs and carpets, to the picking of the eponymous flowers ('The cellar dark glowed with their arrival') in order to combine them with fruit to make wine. It is all so beautifully observed: the grandma who loses her nigh-on supernatural skills for cooking good food when she is forced to don her spectacles and use a recipe book; a Happiness Machine; new sneakers; the tracks of a trolley and their significance in boys' lives; the pleasure and importance of sleep, and love, and memory, change, happiness, time, and of Coming Alive; games of kick-the-can, a lawn being cut – with the mundane and the magical jostling for position and all being viewed as special from a young perspective...

Simple joys are everywhere in *Dandelion Wine* – the childish zest and lust for life neatly suggesting the darker forces and grim reapers that are present in any small town, American or otherwise, by their very exclusion and absence. If the bottling of the dandelion wine every summer is symbolic of nice things being caught and kept in one safe place, there is plenty of the world's ulterior motives on the dustier side of the glass. Life, in *Dandelion Wine*, is keenly separated from death. But they are both present in one form or another.

What joys! What sorrows to come! This volume of interconnected stories and vignettes is recommended with a smile. Introduced by Stephen King, with illustrations from the stories' original publications, this is a veritable delight, available in three distinct versions. The understandably most expensive of these versions also includes another collection, *Summer Morning, Summer Night*, and some fascinating, contextualised correspondence between the author and his publisher. **David Mathew**



## TESSERACTS ELEVEN

Cory Doctorow & Holly Phillips, eds

Edge Science Fiction & Fantasy, 344pp, US\$19.95 pb

I have in my hands an anthology of 'amazing Canadian speculative fiction'. "Does the world need 'Canadian' science fiction?" is Doctorow's question in his introduction. I like the way that question goes straight to the heart of things. Is that a specifically Canadian trait? Something I should look out for as I read this anthology?

In turn, I have a question of my own: what makes these stories 'Canadian'? What is this Canadian-ness of which Doctorow speaks, this Canadian-ness which Canadians have so much more of than

any other sf-writing nationality? How does it inform their work? And if it doesn't, why is their work being designated as Canadian?

And have you noticed that if you keep saying a particular word over and over it gradually loses all meaning? Canadian, Canadian, Canadian.

As Doctorow notes, Canada is too often defined by how it is not American, but there is something disquieting about the oblique way in which he tries to define Canadian speculative fiction – "quiet, introspective," "particularly incisive on the subject of what it means to be Canadian," and most importantly, "we're good at looking, at figuring out what makes other cultures tick." Doctorow seems to be unintentionally propelling the 'Canadian' sf writer into a peculiarly Tiptreeish position: 'the writers readers don't see', sitting on the sidelines, watching, watching... though, forgive me, isn't this what all writers supposedly do? Doctorow's contention is that this is "a robust position from which to write science fiction," given that science fiction is about the present day. What Canadians do, apparently, is to bring their particular cultural awareness to bear on an increasingly fragmented world, hunting out the 'common threads'.

It sounds wonderful – but do the stories and poems measure up to the theory? They're all stories by people born or living in Canada, and a lot of them are low-key and introspective. But were I trying to construct a picture of Canadian-ness from reading them, what would I come up with? The word that springs to mind, regrettably, is 'pleasant'. These are all very pleasant stories. None disappointed me; one or two caught my attention a little more actively, but none

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actually prompted that 'gosh-wow' moment that I thought the best speculative fiction was supposed to produce.

In fact, too often I felt a sense of over-familiarity in such things as Madeline Ashby's neatly constructed but ultimately 'yes? well?' time-travel story, 'In Which Joe and Laurie Save Rock 'n' Roll', the title of which probably tells you all you need to know. Or what about Khria Deefholt's 'Persephone's Library' or Susan Forest's 'Tomorrow and Tomorrow', both set in a close future in which wider society has collapsed and small groups are variously surviving through religious fanaticism and breaking family taboos. There are others, very similar in nature.

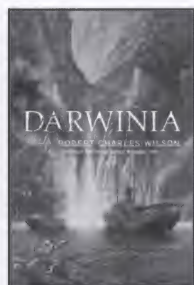
Of those that raised a moment's recognition, I'd single out Kate Riedel's 'Phoebus 'Gins Arise', a stern mixture of the fantastic and the small-town prosaic, which deals with the flourishing of one woman's long-suppressed artistic temperament. Claude Lalumière's 'The Object of Worship' is a satisfyingly savage little story about the effects of belief. Also, Jerome Stueart's 'Bear With Me', while it has an annoyingly punning title, is a neat modern twist on the old story of Beauty and the Beast. And it even has a certain 'Canadian-ness' about it, if only in terms of setting.

Or am I looking at this anthology in the wrong way? Is Doctorow's Canadian-ness a red herring? In her afterword, Holly Phillips lays alarmingly firm, almost special-pleading emphasis on how writers are bringing home "those grand ideas, those [...] moral strivings" that once upon a time could only be dealt with in the wide expanses of other worlds. Or rather, as it turns out, most of the anthology's submissions were set in this world (or something remarkably like



it) rather than far away in other worlds. The two are not necessarily the same, though I have a suspicion that other editors are finding something similar, which means that it is not a specifically Canadian phenomenon.

In which case, what does this anthology tell me about Canadian short speculative fiction? It tells me that Canadian-based writers are going through a quiet and introspective period, with stories and poems that all strike a very similar low-key note, and that as a reader I still hunger for something a little bit more...well, gosh-wow, I suppose. And I don't think either thing is a specifically Canadian phenomenon. **Maureen Kincaid Speller**



**DARWINIA**  
**Robert Charles Wilson**  
Orb, 320pp, \$14.95 tpb

The Americas are the New World, and Europe is the Old World. But not in *Darwinia*, first published in 1998. In March 1912 the 'Miracle' took place, and Europe became the new, dangerous, unexplored world. For all of Europe about as far east as the Urals, plus a generous

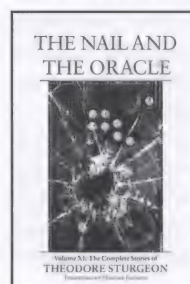
slice of the North African coast vanished amidst a fantastic display of light in the sky.

Replaced by a wild land that approximates to the physical contours of old Europe, the new Old World is inhabited by flora and fauna totally different – usually repulsive and often deadly. In the United States, now effectively the only world superpower, the Miracle is taken by most people as evidence of Divine intervention – a strange miracle indeed. The new lands are nicknamed 'Darwinia' by the sensationalist Hearst press, as an ironic comment on the continent's apparent creation out of nothing, and its seeming lack of history or evolution. But the name sticks.

The first explorers and settlers begin to penetrate Darwinia. The (Woodrow) Wilson Doctrine is soon proclaimed, to keep Europe free from its old frontiers and national struggles (of course, all the inhabitants of Europe having vanished along with their countries). A rump British Empire, under Lord Kitchener in Canada, stands alone for a few years, until New London is bombarded by an American fleet and a compromise is reached. In 1920 the first serious expedition to systematically explore Darwinia sails down a very different Rhine. The expedition comes across a gigantic, ruined, and empty stone city in the foothills of the Alps.

So far *Darwinia* could give the impression of being little more than an enjoyable romp into yet another alternate world, even one with a 'what if' truly staggering in its unexplained occurrence and vivid in its depiction. And just when *Darwinia* does indeed seem to be consolidating into a heady mixture of Wells, *The Lost World*, Lovecraft, and Richard Dawkins, with its latter-day Lewis and Clarks, neo-Noachian geologists, and the occasional sceptic, other hints and strains begin to make themselves more clearly and darkly felt. Now there is evidence that everything that humanity thought it knew – right down to the foundations of its view of its place in the universe – is wrong. Wilson succeeds in creating a new world, and then completely sweeping away all the assumptions and possible fragments of assumptions that have been given as its basis since the Miracle. *Darwinia* evolves into a novel of a gigantic conceptual breakthrough, as the reasons for what has happened begin to become clearer, and a suitably cosmic explanation in the Stapledon or Baxter mould is gradually revealed. And there is also the human touch – the well-realised characters, both sympathetic

and unsympathetic, all have their important parts to play, and are not merely bystanders or victims of the immense unfolding drama that is *Darwinia*. **John Howard**



**THE NAIL AND THE ORACLE: THE COMPLETE STORIES OF THEODORE STURGEON, VOLUME XI**

**Theodore Sturgeon**

North Atlantic Books, 304pp, \$35 hb

Are you still keeping up? It's been thirteen years and eleven volumes and still no end in sight. Even the prolific Philip K. Dick only filled five volumes. And with the previously unpublished stories that took up so much of the first couple of volumes (several of them illustrating that stories are often unpublished for a reason, and all of them proving that being the best short story writer in science fiction doesn't make every story you write a gem), it wouldn't be surprising if people failed to keep up with Sturgeon's *Complete Stories*.

So how are things doing now, with the volume that takes us through the 1960s? This was a strange time for Theodore Sturgeon, the era in which the Zeitgeist most closely matched his own liberal, liberated views, yet his glory days were already passed. Harlan Ellison, with whom Sturgeon stayed for some time in the sixties, reports that he had a penchant for answering the door naked, a

**One feels that the sexually free-and-easy stories that he wrote should have found a natural home, but they didn't. He wasn't even writing them: there are only twelve stories in this volume, written over the thirteen years from 1957 to 1970. The writer who should have been most attuned to the times doesn't seem to have been able to capture the moment**

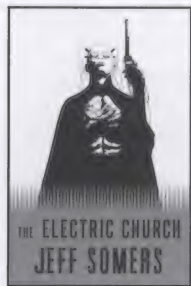
quirk that even in the anything-goes sixties was rather frowned upon. One feels that the sexually free-and-easy stories that he wrote should have found a natural home, but they didn't. He wasn't even writing them: there are only twelve stories in this volume, written over the thirteen years from 1957 to 1970. The writer who should have been most attuned to the times doesn't seem to have been able to capture the moment in his fiction.

There is sexual liberation here. This is the volume that includes 'If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?', his hymn to incest that was one of the best things in Ellison's *Dangerous Visions*. And he remains consistently non-judgemental on all things sexual. The only story in which one feels called upon to condemn a character is the crime story 'Assault and Little Sister' in which an ugly woman falsely accuses a man of assault in order to enjoy the attention it brings her. But beyond these, the majority of the stories are unadventurous in their attitude and often unadventurous in their writing.

There is a cowboy story, 'Ride In, Ride Out' (written with Don Ward), which follows exactly the pattern you expect: lone stranger rides into town, gets caught up in trouble, straps on his gunbelt, sorts out the trouble, rides out of town. It really is as clichéd as that makes it sound. And later in the volume there's 'Jorry's Gap', about a disaffected youth going to the bad, which is exactly the sort of story you imagine parents shaking their heads over as they complain about the youth of today. If you encountered these on their own you certainly wouldn't imagine you were reading one of the great short story writers of the century.



Indeed, though the sf stories in this volume are better, they mostly don't live up to that reputation. 'How To Forget Baseball' and 'It Was Nothing – Really' are fun but not outstanding; 'The Nail and the Oracle' has a twist ending and a view of computers neither of which have stood the test of time. But there is one stand-out story here: 'When You Care, When You Love', which was originally intended as the opening for a novel that, alas, never got written. Analyse the story and it seems commonplace: super-rich woman employs all her incredible resources to recover her dead lover. But the prose is glorious, the tone of voice is unique, and when you try to work out what writerly skill he has used to make it that good you just can't do it, all you can say in the end is that it really is that good. So at last we see exactly why Sturgeon has that reputation, and why it is worth persisting with this series. **Paul Kincaid**



## THE ELECTRIC CHURCH

**Jeff Somers**

Orbit, 363pp, £9.99 tpb

From the meanest streets of New York to the cheerless alleys of London, reputable Gunner for hire Avery Cates is squeezed between rock 'n' roll and a hard place, when caught by corrupt cops and blackmailed to assassinate Dennis Squalor – 'Founder and chief prophet'

of the Electric Church, a priesthood of immortal cyborgs that are suspected of winning new converts by murdering them first. With psychic sidekick Kev Gatz and a hurriedly-assembled bunch of caper-ready experts, the swaggering Cates accepts the 'impossible mission' with his usual world-weary grimace (though his expression may result from an unhealthy habit of swilling illicit booze in horrible dives).

In the late 1980s, after *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer*, too many hack writers and low-budget filmmakers tried and failed to imitate that classic movie or seminal novel, all and sundry wishing their copycat works would become the 'next big thing' in sf. Reading like something that fell from the fast-forward cyberpunk bandwagon, and that is finding publication rather belatedly, this dreadfully unimaginative debut novel could be mistaken for a well preserved time-capsule exemplar from that era of derivative schlock.

Cates is a resolutely lowbrow action-hero stereotype, cured of all his backstory sins via cynically amoral lobotomy at the author's hand. Dialogue is risibly hackneyed at best, while descriptive and 'dramatic' parts of the trite and formulaic plot are equally stale. At times, its ordinariness is quite extraordinary. There are repeated warnings about aggressive police and the dangers of confronting them. "Fucking System Pigs, man. They were not to be fucked with." In fact, nearly everything and almost everyone here is fucking, fucked, a fucker ('mother' prefix optional), or just a fuck. There are prime examples of such unforgivably lazy writing on each page.

Allegedly a robot horror adventure, presumably intended as irony-free black comedy, *The Electric Church* remains depressingly inept on every level, even if considered as a muddled up collection of trash noir and sci-fi clichés for macho-bullshit junkies. After fifty pages the boredom becomes intolerable. After 100 pages, sticking my fingers into the toaster while hoping for a power-cut seemed like it could be more fun than continuing to reading this book.

Did an editor at Orbit lose a bet about slush-pile manuscripts? How did this tripe get chosen for trade paperback? The standard of Somers's genre prose barely rises above that of the average vanity press or self-published print-on-demand stuff. **Tony Lee**



## THE METATEMPORAL DETECTIVE

**Michael Moorcock**

Pyr, 328pp, \$25 hb

"What larks, eh, gentlemen!" So says the rather theatrical Mrs Una Persson, during a fleeting guest appearance at the conclusion of 'The Mystery of the Texas Twister'. If she – and by implication, the story's author – is referring to 'amusing adventures and escapades', then

most of the stories brought together in this new collection are certainly that – playful and, at times, even mischievous!

Over the years Moorcock has occasionally written what can be best described as his own fond tribute to the pulp detective stories that he read as a boy. Originally seen in publications ranging from *New Statesman & Society* to *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, ten of these stories have now been brought together as *The Metatemporal Detective*, along with a new adventure which perfectly encapsulates why – despite their literary lineage – these tales are pure Michael Moorcock.

Moorcock has, of course, long played with the concept of a multi-verse filled with alternative timelines and variations on characters and archetypes. Standing at the heart of this collection is Sir Seaton Begg, gentleman detective for hire – except, of course, when he's crime journalist Hank Beck or the cynical metatemporal investigator Sam Begg. For the most part, though, this Holmesian detective exists

**Although this steam-punk world is, for the most part, delightfully brought to life by Moorcock, there are occasions when his writing is just too arch for its own good. And sadly the political 'satire' of the likes of 'Texas Twister' – set in an independent Texas run by 'King' George Putz and his oil-soaked cronies – is little more than empty caricature**

within an early twentieth century where the petrol-guzzling internal combustion engine never really took off as a concept, where cars are battery-powered and giant steam-driven airships remain the fastest form of international transport. Although this steam-punk world is, for the most part, delightfully brought to life by Moorcock, there are occasions when his writing is just too arch for its own good. And sadly the political 'satire' of the likes of 'Texas Twister' – set in an independent Texas run by 'King' George Putz and his oil-soaked cronies – is little more than empty caricature.

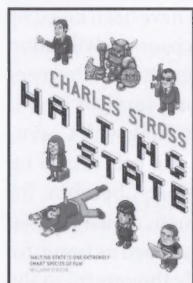
Sir Seaton is also rather difficult to like; honourable, yes, and highly intelligent, but hardly sympathetic. It's only in 'The Case of the Nazi Canary' that his own moral compass becomes more than thin cardboard – when he explains to his genuinely horrified companion Dr 'Taffy' Sinclair that sometimes "it is just about possible for two wrongs to make a right."

Much more involving is Sir Seaton's regular nemesis, *bête noir* and distant cousin – the lean, long-haired albino generally referred to as Monsieur Zenith. He is, of course, a clear reflection of Michael Moorcock's most famous creation, Elric of Melniboné. Although invariably cast as the villain, at least according to Sir Seaton, the intriguing implication of this collection is that Monsieur Zenith simply operates within a higher, more complex morality; indeed, his actions at the finale are surprising, genuinely moving and yet entirely in keeping with what we've come to know about the man in the previous stories.

The final tale also makes clear the true focus of this collection – and it's not, despite what the cover blurb might say, simply a playful



battle of wits between a Sherlock Holmes clone and his own Professor Moriarty. *The Metatemporal Detective* is ultimately an entertaining collection of stories exploring the eternal struggle between the forces of Order and Chaos – a subject at the heart of most of Moorcock's work – and the vital realisation that neither can be allowed to dominate if life of any kind is to survive. **Paul F. Cockburn**



### HALTING STATE

**Charles Stross**

Orbit, 352pp, £10.99 tpb

Written entirely in the second person, *Halting State* immerses the reader in a traditional game of cat and mouse, played against the very untraditional backdrop of the world some ten years hence. It doesn't take long to become accustomed to Stross's second-

person gambit. Emulating the game-playing environment in which it is set, *Halting State* proves that games have a way to go before they become as engrossing as the novel.

Following the points-of-view of Edinburgh Police Sergeant Sue Smith, geeky programmer Jack Reed and spreadsheet-slinging Elaine Barnaby, the novel lays out a very tidy little scenario in which a bank robbery that transpires in a virtual world has some serious real-world implications. Stross leavens this with a very agile wit and a generous sense of humour; *Halting State* is by no means a comedy, but it is very funny indeed, in a low-key, off-keel manner.

Stross creates a compelling cast of players and seems as adept with his women as he is with the men. Sue Smith is something of a rookie; she tends to keep her head low, her brogue high and her emotions bottled up. Jack Reed lays in a thick layer of post-noughties jaded jargon, of the sort that will have heavy-duty fans a-twitter. Elaine is equally technical, though her expertise is fiscal rather than computational. The second-person narrative technique might make them all sound the same, were it not for Stross's prose skills. The bottom line is that it's fun to step into anybody's shoes.

Stross himself has addressed the dangers of writing such near-future fiction. In ten years we'll know the shape of the world, and it may not much resemble that which Stross has painted. But *Halting State* isn't about predictions, it's very clearly – second-person narration clearly – about observations. Stross is a keen observer of his own social, political and technological milieus, and what he sees when he looks about him in the present is the future. In that sense, this is the perfect novel not just for the digerati, but for anyone who finds the present more and more incomprehensible. Strip away the future, and what you have left is three people trying to keep from getting chewed up and spit out by a world that doesn't seem to give a fig about their fates. You care, however. After all, each of them is you. **Rick Kleffel**



### THE BEST OF LADY CHURCHILL'S ROSEBUD WRISTLET

**Kelly Link & Gavin Grant, eds**

Del Rey, 393pp, \$14.99 tpb

It's almost damning with faint praise to use the word 'quirky', but it was Link and Grant who came up with the title, so in a way they were asking for it. They mention in the introduction that their magazine was named after

a tattoo that Winston's mother had on her wrist. They don't mention that ol' Winston was, like the magazine, the product of an

American lady and a British gentleman. This cutely explains the title as well as the 'special relationship' that Winston shackled British foreign policy with. Winston's brother, however, was allegedly the son of an Austrian spy – but now we're digressing into research for conspiracy novels.

The magazine has been one of the delights of the American small press for a decade now, and, alongside such fellow travellers as *Electric Velocipede*, has been responsible for some of the finest fantasy writing around. This collection more or less follows the chronology of the magazine and includes many of the spoof articles that make it such a surreal and funny trip. Agony column, anyone? Pointless but entertaining lists are also scattered throughout the anthology. There are, of course, several real articles added to the mix as well, and sometimes the reader is a couple of paragraphs into something before he can work out what manner of beast it is.

Many of the stories are also blessed with a lightness of touch, and fine prose seems to be the defining characteristic that the editors have sought out. Some, such as Veronica Schanoes's 'Serpents' and Theodora Goss's 'The Rapid Advance of Sorrow', are artfully written but almost impenetrable textually. Others take language as their starting point and run with it. Nalo Hopkinson's 'Tan-Tan and Dry Bone' creates a patois that seems ages old in its folk-tale familiarity. Tan-Tan is a young woman who is tricked into feeding the voracious and evil Dry Bone and has to find a way to free herself from him. Hopkinson stays true to the contract between reader and storyteller. Philip Raines and Harvey Welles almost wander into

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incomprehensibility in the astonishing 'The Fishie' but manage to dance with the language of a simple coastal community in a world that's not our own.

Other stories merely nod at strangeness on their way past. Jeffrey Ford deals up American nostalgia in 'What's Sure To Come', where a small boy watches as the men around him warily bet on the premonitions of his grandmother. To acknowledge her ability to pick winning horses, however, would also involve having to acknowledge her ability to predict other, graver, things. There is magic in John Brown's frontier adventure as his clumsy backwoodsman circles around the 'Bright Water' woman of the title, but it is a slight sort of magic that can almost be ignored, and it is rendered impotent by the characters' trajectories. And the final story, written as a modern fairy tale placed in a horror setting, is as fine a look at the potential of fiction as you will read anywhere; Cara Spindler and David Erik Nelson are to be commended for it.

Link and Grant also co-edit *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, and this seems to have set up a feedback loop of excellence. One way to get yourself noticed for *TYBF&H* is to submit your material to *LCRW*. Link and Grant can't lose. This is an enormously enjoyable collection, and if it were twenty percent shorter then it would be perfect. It'll cut the feet from under their back issues sales, but if there's any justice then it will multiply their subscriber base by at least an order of magnitude. **Jim Steel**

**More book reviews and author interviews are regularly posted to the website (ttapress.com). Visit often and/or subscribe to the feed.**

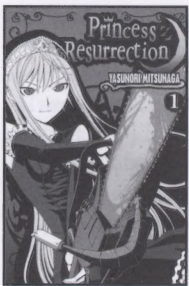




**PARASYTE**  
**Hitoshi Iwaaki**  
Del Rey Manga

High school student Shinichi wakes up to see a 'snake' burrowing into his hand; his body is being invaded by an alien parasite. His parents tell him that he's just been having a violent nightmare. But when Shinichi's right arm takes on a will of its own and an eye appears, the intruder begins to talk to its host. Earth is under attack.

First published in 1990, *Parasyte* is an intelligent and chilling exploration of what it really means to be human. Hitoshi Iwaaki portrays the alien invaders and the gruesome transformations they perpetrate on their unwilling human hosts with classic comic book science-fiction style gusto.



**PRINCESS RESURRECTION**  
**Yasunori Mitsunaga**  
Del Rey Manga

Hiro, searching for his older sister in the big city, is run over by a truck. The last image he sees before he dies is that of a beautiful girl in a tiara. He wakes in the eerie silence of a hospital morgue and staggers out into the street, impelled to find her, arriving just in time to protect her from a werewolf attack by...dying again! She is Princess Hime, she tells him as she brings him back to life for the second time with a few drops of her blood. And the price of his miraculous resurrection? He is bound to serve her forever as a blood warrior; for without regular doses of her unique blood, he will die for good.

A quirky and inventive twist on a standard Gothic theme, *Princess Resurrection* is a tale of vampires, werewolves, android maids, and a vicious royal family feud in the shadowy world of the undead. Hiro's frequent violent deaths in the service of his beautiful and chain-saw wielding princess – and subsequent resurrections – add a touch of macabre humour to this unusual series.

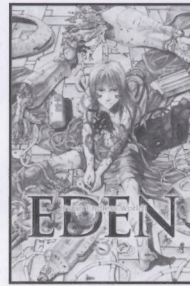


**DRAGON EYE: VOLUME 1**  
**Hairi Fujiyama**  
Del Rey Manga

Deadly viruses decimating mankind is a favourite theme of recent manga and anime series and in *Dragon Eye* the 'D Virus' turns its victims into 'bloodthirsty monsters' called Dracules. Young Leila Mikami, whose parents were killed by a Dracule, sets out to join VIUS, teams of elite warriors who have very strong antibodies against the virus and are sent out to destroy the deadly Dracules.

*Dragon Eye* looks at first glance like a typical shonen adventure, a little reminiscent of *D. Gray-Man*, bursting with fights, warrior codes, and monsters. But a well-told, complex and involving story unfolds as Leila and the other new recruits are rescued from a deadly Dracule attack by a feisty blue-haired boy called Issa Kazuma. His secret is the Dragon Eye in his forehead, which lends him tremendous power, whilst at the same time slowly destroying all that is human in his body. And, despite his youth, he's the captain of Squad Zero to which Leila is assigned. Add in a third new squad member, Sosei Yukimura, out to exact revenge on Issa for killing his twin

sister and an intriguing scenario is established, full of potential for future conflict. What is Issa's secret?



**EDEN: IT'S AN ENDLESS WORLD!**  
**Hiroki Endo**  
Titan Books

Most of the people of Earth have been killed by a virus and in the ensuing chaos as civilisation breaks down, a militant organisation Propater takes control. Elijah, a young survivor who is immune to the virus, is travelling with Cherubim, an AI combat robot. He gets mixed up with a group of 'freedom fighters' who want to use Cherubim for their own nefarious purposes. Beautifully and meticulously drawn – if such a grim dystopian vision can aptly be described as beautiful – Endo's tale ranges in tone from the perceptively thoughtful to the graphically (though never gratuitously so) violent.



**LE CHEVALIER D'EON**  
**Tou Ubukata/Kiriko Yumeji**  
Del Rey Manga

Lia de Beaumont has been murdered by a sinister group calling themselves the Poets whose occult powers threaten Louis XV, his court, and the very stability of France. Her soul possesses her younger brother, D'Eon de Beaumont, as he sets out to track down her murderers and to defeat the threat to the crown before revolution breaks out.

Set in an alternate 18th Century France, this dark, blood-soaked melange of revenge, black arts and political intrigue, will appeal to anyone who enjoys gothic or historical fantasy. This is the manga of the novel on which the lavish anime series of the same name is based – and it's fascinating to compare the two (quite different) ways in which author Tou Ubukata develops the same story.



**DEATH NOTE**  
**Tsugumi Obha/Takeshi Obata**  
Viz Manga (12 volumes, complete)

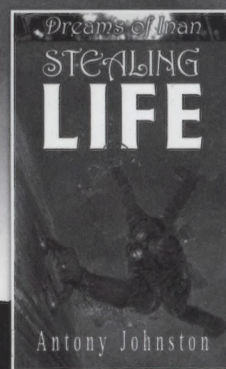
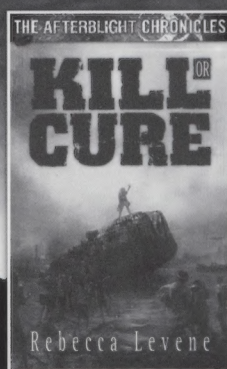
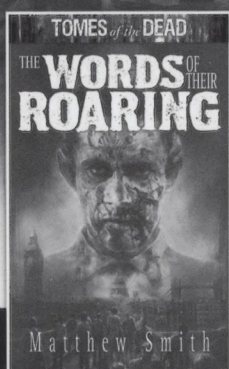
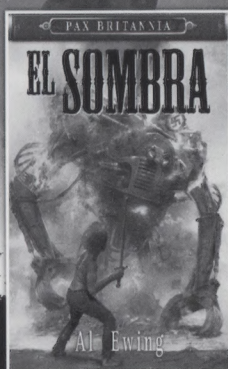
A brilliant yet bored student, Light Yagami, finds a black notebook. It has been carelessly – or purposely – dropped by Ryuk, a shinigami, a god of death. Light discovers that simply by writing a person's name in the notebook, he can cause them to die. There are many rules, of course, affecting the way the notebook can be used, which Light only begins to discover as he sets out on a personal crusade to rid the world of 'criminals'. But who is the real criminal here as Light, dubbed 'Kira' (killer) by the media, is himself hunted down, first by the FBI, then by the equally brilliant and enigmatic detective known simply as 'L'?

*Death Note* has been the runaway success of the past few years and has been made into an anime TV series, two live action films and a live TV series. It has even been banned in China, where the idea of the death note was held to be corrupting young minds. The story could certainly be seen as an exploration of contemporary morality, whilst at the same time maintaining and developing an addictive, bleak and involving thriller. **All reviews by Sarah Ash**



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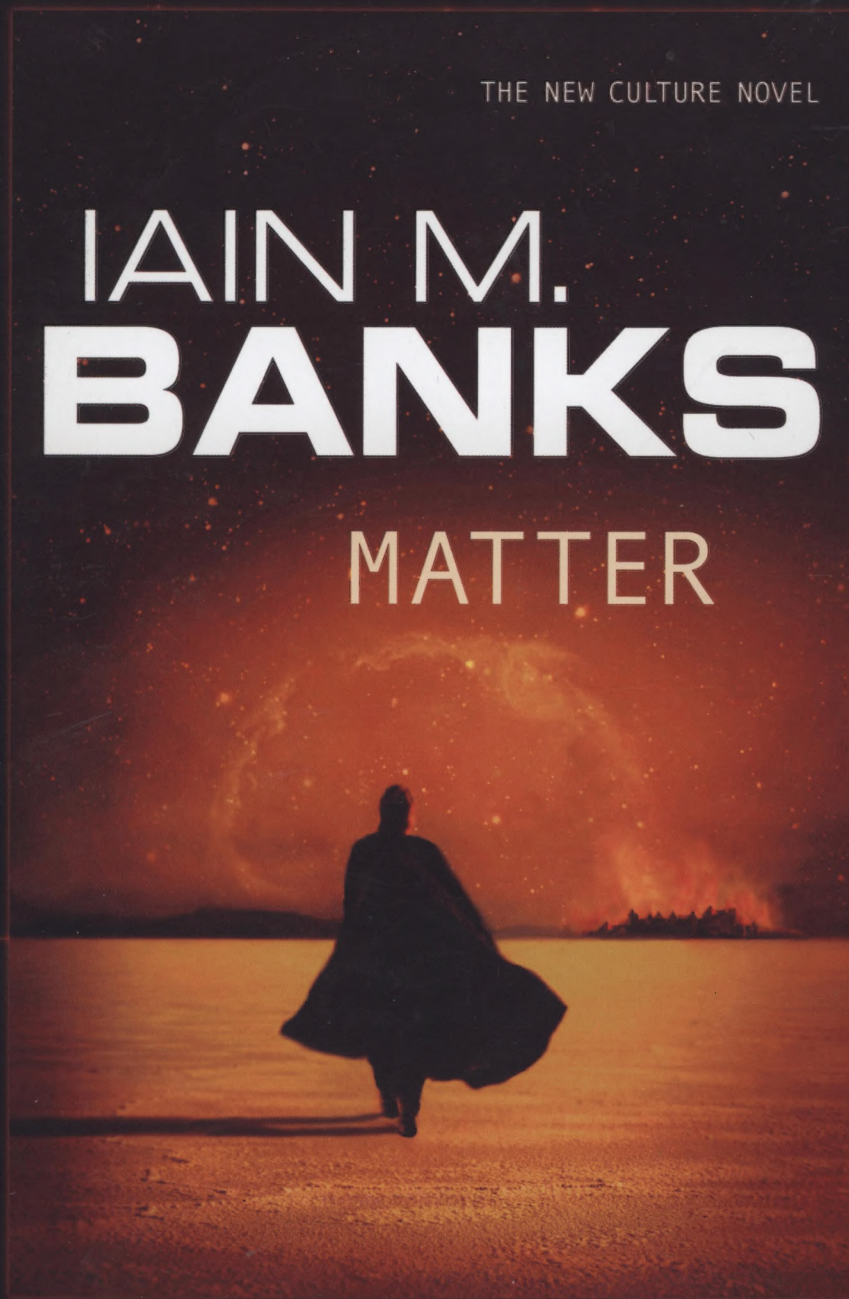
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